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You're Welcome

[image]

Finally getting around to publishing Warriors: Legacy, *Visions of Embers*, the spiritual successor to *Embers* and *Ashes*. Yes, I know it's literally been like, two years. Thanks for all the comments and likes and saves, etc, that actually kept this project in my mind for the past couple years (otherwise I *definitely* would have forgotten about it and just moved on with my life. Thanks for keeping me trapped in this hell loop*).

So, I know I said before that the plan is to do six books. That was the original plan, both for the original *Embers* arc and my original plan for this new "Legacy" arc. But I realized that it's inefficient to do six separate projects on Wattpad, and each subsequent new project invariably gets less views, so instead I'm going to do this in three parts, each one aiming to be roughly the size of an actual canon Warriors book (so by the end, the three-book series should end up being *approximately* half the length of a canon arc). We'll see if I can actually get through it without my plots devolving into chaos again, though.

Don't get too excited yet - I'm going to try to update a chapter every 1-3 weeks, but there will probably be hiatuses because life is chaos, the world is falling apart, and I have ADHD. But somewhere, somehow, sometime, hopefully this *will* end up being finished. Actually, on that note, I have a question for y'all:

Would you prefer that I try to update with one chapter consistently every few weeks, *or* that **I just upload as many chapters as I write at one time, and likely end up with slightly longer hiatuses**? Feel free to answer in the comments (try to keep it to one comment thread for more precise tallying). Unless public opinion dictates otherwise, for the time being I will spacing chapters out every few weeks.

Link to the new project in the comments, since Wattpad won't let me actually put links in the story part.

* a joke, it's not actually hell.

Allegiances

[image]

ThunderClan

Leader: Stormstar - shaggy pale gray tabby she-cat with light orange eyes and a black left ear.

Deputy: Patchpelt - handsome pale gray tom with clear blue eyes and black patches.

Medicine Cat: Nettleclaw - big brown tabby tom with golden eyes and lighter patches and a darker back left paw.

Warriors:

Deerfoot - little golden-brown brindled she-cat with light green eyes and a lighter chest, and black paws.

Clearheart - large silver tabby tom with sky blue eyes and a white belly.

Daywhisker - heavy cream-colored tom with yellow eyes and paler patches.

Emberclaw - tall dark ginger she-cat with amber eyes, a black stripe down her spine, and a white muzzle, belly, chest, and paws.

Leafspeck - powerful light ginger-and-white tom with pale orange eyes.

Owlfeather - long-haired tawny tom with light blue eyes and darker legs, tail, ears, and muzzle.

Songfrost - long-legged pale silver tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes and black paws.

Apprentice: Mistpaw

Hazedream - beautiful dark gray-and-white she-cat with dark amber eyes and very long whiskers.

Foxfur - skinny ginger tabby tom with pale blue eyes and a white belly.

Rowanshade - lithe reddish tom with golden eyes and darker eye sockets.

Cinderstorm - big, muscular gray she-cat with vivid blue eyes and a white patch on her chest.

Badgerpelt - somewhat plump pale gray mottled tom with burnt orange eyes and a black spot on his nose.

Apprentice: Smokepaw

Streamtail - slender light gray she-cat with midnight blue eyes and black stripes.

Wrenflight - long-tailed tawny she-cat with gray eyes.

Sparrowfeather - small-eared tortoiseshell tom with yellow eyes and a white muzzle.

Cloudfur - smoky gray tabby she-cat with clear green eyes and white front paws.

Thornclaw - long-haired dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes and a white belly, chest, paws, and tail-tip.

Branchleg - skinny, shaggy brown tom with orange eyes and darker legs.

Apprentice: Batpaw

Forestdapple - broad-shouldered tortoiseshell tom with dark amber eyes.

Apprentices:

Mistpaw - beautiful misty gray she-cat with sky blue eyes.

Smokepaw - long-legged gray tabby tom with white paws and green eyes.

Batpaw - big-eared black she-cat with gray eyes.

Queens:

Snowheart - beautiful white she-cat with cream-colored ears and yellow eyes. Mother of Forestdapple's kits, Wispkit, Bramblekit, Shadekit, and Nightkit.

Sunstep - plump golden she-cat with ice blue eyes and a white muzzle & paws. Expecting Sparrowfeather's kits.

Kits:

Wispkit - skinny white tomkit with dark amber eyes and pale ginger ears.

Bramblekit - big tortoiseshell she-cat with white paws and yellow eyes.

Shadekit - tortoiseshell-and-white tom with amber eyes.

Nightkit - tiny black tom with a white belly.

Elders:

Skypelt - thin blue-gray she-cat with yellow eyes.

Oakclaw - old ginger tabby tom with green eyes and a silver-flecked muzzle.

Briarnose - once-powerful brown tom with amber eyes; completely deaf.

WindClan

Leader: Gorsestar - short-tailed tawny and white she-cat with clear blue eyes.

Deputy: Kestrelwing - sleek pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes a white belly and paws.

Medicine Cat: Rainheart - tiny black-and-white she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice: Tabbypaw

Warriors:

Frostflight - long-legged white tom with green eyes.

Runningheart - bulky tawny tabby tom with green eyes and white paws.

Meadowpelt - long-furred brown tabby she-cat with a white jaw and tail-tip.

Rabbittail - slender brown she-cat with yellow eyes, darker legs, and a stumpy tail.

Apprentice: Brackenpaw

Muddyfoot - small black she-cat with brown paws and amber eyes.

Hareclaw - lithe dusty brown tom with a white belly and pale green eyes.

Lakebelly - big white tom with blue eyes and black spots on his lower back and around his ears.

Flamefur - fluffy light ginger tabby tom with blue eyes and white paws.

Smokebreath - short-furred gray tom with a white muzzle and pale green eyes.

Apprentice: Redpaw

Mousewhisker - thin white she-cat with green eyes pale brown stripes on her face and front legs.

Tansyspots - long-furred calico she-cat with yellow eyes.

Ravenwing - thin, sleek black tom with bright green eyes.

Flowernose - beautiful tawny she-cat with amber eyes and a paler belly, chest, muzzle, and legs.

Apprentice: Fernpaw

Wildstorm - long-legged tortoiseshell tom with dull green eyes.

Skysong - small gray tom with pale green eyes and a white chest, belly, jaw, paws, and tail-tip.

Mossclaw - tall tortoiseshell she-cat with pale green eyes and a white belly and paws.

Rootfur - brown tabby she-cat with a white muzzle and orange eyes.

Fawnfoot - willowy brown she-cat with yellow eyes.

Leappool - small gray she-cat with blue eyes.

Breezetail - tall black tom with blue-gray eyes and a white muzzle, paws, chest, and belly.

Featherfur - soft-furred gray tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentices:

Brackenpaw - big light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Fernpaw - slender ginger she-cat with a white muzzle and green eyes.

Redpaw - small ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Tabbypaw - sleek brown tabby-and-white tom with yellow eyes.

Queens:

Sandshade - thin tawny she-cat with blue eyes. Mother of Breezetail's kits, Dovekit and Grousekit.

Kits:

Dovekit - thin tawny she-kit with blue-gray eyes and white paws.

Grousekit - big black tom with blue eyes and a white tail-tip.

Elders:

Robintail - frail gray tom with green eyes, one of which is blind.

Stripeface - brown tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes.

RiverClan

Leader: Troutstar - heavy white and gray tom with dark gray eyes and a black left ear and back right paw.

Deputy: Dusktalon - muscular gray tom with spring green eyes and darker ears.

Medicine Cat: Frosttail - light gray she-cat with pale blue eyes and a white tail.

Warriors:

Icefire - white tom with dark orange eyes.

Apprentice: Dawnpaw

Pebblefoot - brown tom with huge green eyes and darker paws.

Morningstep - thin cream tom with light blue eyes and paler front legs.

Shadestream - tall smoky gray she-cat with orange eyes, lighter patches, and a paler chest and belly.

Stormsky - sleek dark gray tom with orange eyes and a white chest and belly.

Apprentice: Dustpaw

Mousenose - thin dark brown she-cat with light yellow eyes and darker ears.

Shorestone - little gray-brown tabby tom with amber eyes and black hind paws and tail.

Riverpetal - plump blue-gray she-cat with dull green eyes.

Oakpath - heavy brown tabby tom with light gray eyes and white paws.

Apprentice: Shadowpaw

Willowwhisker - thin silver she-cat with bright blue eyes.

Apprentice: Softpaw

Froghop - small-eared pale silver tom with forest green eyes.

Juniperpool - black she-cat with gray eyes and dark gray legs.

Apprentice: Tanglepaw

Swanfeather - lithe white tom with dark green eyes.

Turtlebite - muscular tortoiseshell and white tom with green eyes.

Nutfur - short-legged light brown tom with light green eyes, a white muzzle, and black legs.

Apprentices:

Dawnpaw - long-legged ginger she-cat with indigo eyes.

Dustpaw - sleek dusty brown tom with blue eyes and a white chest & belly.

Softpaw - large-eyed dark gray she-cat with blue eyes and white paws.

Tanglepaw - big gray-brown mottled tom with yellow-green eyes and black ears.

Shadowpaw - muscular misty gray and black she-cat with yellow eyes and a white tail-tip.

Queens:

Mossheart - lithe silver she-cat with dark green eyes and black stripes. Mother of Oakpath's kits: Swimmingkit, Minnowkit, and Ripplekit.

Sweetblossom - tiny blue-gray she-cat with dull green eyes. Mother of Troutstar's kits: Smokekit, Waterkit, Mistkit, Ashkit.

Lightshine - big-eared silver and white she-cat with indigo eyes. Expecting Nutfur's kits.

Kits:

Swimmingkit - lithe brown tabby she-cat with dark green eyes and white paws.

Minnowkit - small silver tabby she-cat with dark green eyes.

Ripplekit - big silver tom with gray eyes and black stripes.

Smokekit - tiny gray-and-white tom with green eyes and black ears.

Waterkit - little blue-gray she-cat with dark gray eyes and a white patch on her chest.

Mistkit - big white tom with green eyes and a gray patch on his forehead.

Ashkit - fluffy blue-gray tom with gray eyes.

Elders:

Gingerstripe - small-eared pale ginger tabby tom with pale amber eyes and a white chest and belly.

ShadowClan

Leader: Pinestar - handsome tortoiseshell tom with clear green eyes and a white muzzle.

Deputy: Mooncloud - pale silver and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Waspwing - powerful smoky gray and white tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice: Russetpaw

Warriors:

Needleclaw - gray-brown tabby tom with spring green eyes and black legs.

Nightleaf - big black she-cat with bright green eyes.

Ratclaw - dark brown tabby she-cat with unusually long claws and pale green eyes.

Hollytooth - small but muscular dark gray tom with orange eyes.

Redsquirrel - slender dark ginger tom with white paws and dark amber eyes.

Sundawn - little ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest and belly and green eyes.

Cranetail - big white tom with a black tail-tip and yellow eyes.

Birdpelt - long-furred tortoiseshell tom with green eyes.

Apprentice: Sootpaw

Stripeleg - light brown she-cat with tabby stripes on her legs and a white tail-tip.

Dreamsong - muscular black-and-white she-cat with blue eyes.

Nettlefur - big tom with short, course russet fur that's darker on his back and yellow eyes.

Spiderfang - sleek gray she-cat with blue eyes and black stripes.

Pinkpelt - almost pinkish cream-colored she-cat with vivid green eyes.

Palebelly - light brown tabby tom with dark stripes, green eyes, and a white belly & paws.

Apprentices:

Russetpaw - long-furred dark ginger tom with green eyes.

Sootpaw - short-legged gray tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Queens:

Badgerfur - sleek, short-furred black she-cat with yellow eyes and one white paw. Mother of Cranetail's kit, Starlingkit.

Sorrelnose - long-furred brown she-cat with yellow eyes. Expecting.

Kits:

Starlingkit - little black-and-white she-kit with yellow eyes.

Elders:

Specklefur - tortoiseshell she-cat with a white belly and blue eyes.

Cedarfrost - big brown-and-white tom with amber eyes and a gray-flecked muzzle.

Misteyes - little, skinny gray she-cat with a scar-covered face and misty, blind gray eyes.

Tabbytail - dark brown tabby tom with a long tabby-striped tail and pale green eyes.

Prologue

[image]

A she-cat sat bathed in moonlight at the edge of a still forest pool, gazing at the stars reflecting from the mirror-like surface of the water. Her pale tabby fur seemed to almost glow in the faint light, and her large green eyes seemed fixed on something far away. She didn't move at all, even as the wind ruffled her fur and a crow cawed somewhere in the trees.

She didn't move until a voice broke the silence of the night.

"There you are, Whisperleaf."

A large brown tabby tom stood at the top of the hollow in which the pool resided. The she-cat looked up quickly, as if caught in the act of a wrongdoing, then relaxed slightly as she recognized the newcomer.

"Brindleface," she greeted solemnly, dipping her head respectfully. "What do you need?"

The tom gazed at her for a moment, then began padding down the spiral path to the water's edge- a path with countless paw prints imprinted into the stone. As he descended, the his paws slipped into some as if they were his own.

"Cherryfleck said you had a vision," he finally replied as he came to stand next to the she-cat. He turned his head to look at her, but she didn't gaze back; instead, her eyes were focused once again on the water. "Is that true?"

Whisperleaf nodded slowly. "Yes."

Brindleface followed her gaze, but whatever she was staring so intently at, he could not see it. He flicked his tail and looked back at her. "What was it about?"

"Fire," she breathed, eyes widening slightly as she finally looked up at the other cat. "Fire and death."

Brindleface narrowed his eyes. "A prophecy?"

Whisperleaf shook her head. "No, prophecies are warnings. The disaster I saw was unavoidable." She tilted her head. "But I saw words too." She paused. "Words that may help save lives, here and elsewhere. Those were a prophecy. " She glanced back at the water nervously.

"What did it say?" Brindleface asked, softly but urgently.

Whisperleaf didn't reply for a moment, still gazing at the water. But then she seemed to gain confidence, and met the tabby tom's eyes, her gaze seeming to bore into his.

"Those now united must divide, and the divided must return to their roots and call forth the spurned." She paused, as if second guessing herself, before finishing: "Only then can the new sun rise and chase away death."

There was silence in the hollow for a moment as Brindleface took her words in. When he spoke, it was somewhat hesitantly.

"Do you have any idea what that means?"

Whisperleaf shook her head again. "No." She averted her eyes once more. "But I think the answer will reveal itself in time."

Brindleface sighed. "We should tell the others."

Whisperleaf shrugged. "If that's what you think is best."

The tom tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at her. "Do you not think so?" The she-cat flicked her tail.

"I'm not sure it matters at this point. We don't have any idea what it means."

"Perhaps someone else will," Brindleface pointed out, flicking his tail. "Besides, they'll want to know regardless of whether or not we

have answers."

Whisperleaf hesitated, seeming uneasy. Brindleface was silent, waiting for her to speak her mind, but she didn't seem willing to give voice to her fears.

"What's wrong?" he prompted her, nudging her shoulder.

"You saw how StarClan was divided over the last prophecy," she meowed slowly. "I'm just afraid the same will happen again."

Brindleface was silent, unsure how to reassure her. In truth, he wondered the same thing. Things had been tense among the warrior ancestors since the battle with the Dark Forest, even though everything had ultimately been resolved. He sometimes worried that they would separate into their Clans again.

"Arguing won't stop the prophecy from coming true," he meowed slowly. "We have to at least try."

Whisperleaf sighed. "You're right." She got to her paws and began padding up the slope, pausing and glancing back at the other cat as she stepped onto the path. "Coming?" The brown tom nodded and followed after her, and together they slipped over the top of the hollow, into the darkness.

Chapter 1

Fire blazed in the trees, lighting up the night sky as though it were day. Redpaw watched in horror as it devoured the forest, working its way to the creek that formed the border between ThunderClan and WindClan.

Maybe the water will stop it, he dared to hope. He felt a trill of bittersweet joy as the flames stopped as the water's edge; then his stomach seemed to drop out as a burning branch fell from one of the trees and landed in the grass. Redpaw held his breath, hoping the grass was too wet to ignite, but once again his hopes proved fruitless.

The fire spread even more quickly here, and almost before Redpaw realized it the flames were upon him.

I'm going to die, he thought helplessly, feeling the oppressive heat of the flames against his pelt. *There's no way I can outrun this.* He closed his eyes, ready to feel the sting of the flames devouring him like a blade of grass.

Instead, he opened his eyes to darkness.

Redpaw let out a sigh as he realized he was safe in his nest back at camp, and the smell of smoke was fading quickly. Outside the apprentices' den, the sky was black and rain poured down in sheets, as it had been doing for days.

No way anything could burn, wet as it is, he thought with satisfaction, pushing himself into a sitting position. Even though he realized he was safe, he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep again, at least not for a while. He sighed as he looked out of the entrance to the den, closing his eyes for a moment.

This is the third time this moon.

Ever since he was a kit, Redpaw had been plagued by nightmares. Recently, it had been a recurring dream about fire, but before that, his dreams were made up of a different kind of carnage- grass soaked in blood and strewn with bodies. Even though his mother Fawnfoot always told him they were just nightmares, they felt real to him, and he couldn't just forget them. The stench of blood had stained his mind, even when he should have been too young to know the scent. Now, he was almost relieved to only dream about fire, except for the fact that it always disrupted his sleep.

"Another nightmare?" whispered a sleepy voice, followed closely by a quiet yawn. Redpaw recognized the voice of his sister Fernpaw, who was curled in the moss beside him. Looking over, he could barely make out her ginger pelt in the darkness.

"Yeah," he replied softly, returning his gaze to the rain.

"The battlefield again?" she asked, raising up slowly to sit beside him. He felt comforted by the brush of her pelt against him; she had always been there to talk to him, never telling him to ignore it and just go back to sleep like everyone else.

He shook his head at her question. "No, the fire." He paused. "Do you think it'll come true?" Fernpaw glanced outside at the rain.

"Not for a while, at least," she replied, twitching her tail.

"What about when the rain stops?"

Fernpaw sighed. "I don't know. Your dreams have never come true before, right?"

Redpaw shuffled his paws. "No..." *But that doesn't mean they can't.*

"Then don't worry too much about it," Fernpaw advised, butting Redpaw's shoulder with her head. Redpaw grunted but otherwise didn't respond.

"Is something else bothering you?" she asked, gazing at him. Her green eyes faintly reflected what little light filtered in from outside.

Redpaw hesitated. "I died. In my dream." Fernpaw blinked, then tilted her head.

"How?"

"The fire got me. I couldn't run away from it, it was burning the whole moor."

Fernpaw was silent for a moment. "Maybe..." she paused. "Maybe, if it's true, it's a warning so when it happens you know to run sooner?" she suggested. Redpaw shrugged, unconvinced.

"Well," Fernpaw meowed quietly when her littermate didn't reply, "for now you should get some sleep. I think Smokebreath and Flowernose plan on tiring us out tomorrow."

"They do that every day," Redpaw muttered, rolling his eyes. Fernpaw shrugged.

"Even more reason to rest. Come on, I'll help you." Redpaw sighed and laid back down in the moss, curling up with his tail over his nose. Fernpaw laid next to him, pressing her side against his back, and started to lick his pelt rhythmically. Despite his fear for the future, Redpaw couldn't help it as a soft purr welled in his throat, and the soothing caress of her tongue lulled him to sleep.

It was still raining when the dawn came, but fortunately the downpour had slowed to a drizzle. Clouds still covered the sky, letting only the faintest gray light flood over the landscape as the sun come over the horizon.

Fernpaw and Redpaw sat huddled in the shelter of a gorse bush. Redpaw was grooming himself vigorously, while Fernpaw fidgeted beside him.

"There they are," she meowed as three shapes emerged from the warriors' den: a beautiful tawny she-cat and short-furred gray tom, led by slender brown she-cat. The brown she-cat seemed unbothered by the rain, but the tawny one flinched slightly with each raindrop, and the tom appeared to be grumbling under his breath.

Redpaw got to his paws as they approached, greeting his mentor with a solemn nod. Fernpaw greeted hers more warmly, standing and waving her tail in the air.

"Good morning, Flowernose!" she purred at the tawny she-cat, giving her a friendly nuzzle.

"Is it?" the tom, Smokebreath, growled irritably, joining the apprentices under the bush. Redpaw rolled his eyes in amusement; his mentor could be a bit grumpy sometimes, but he was a good teacher.

The brown she-cat- named Rabbittail on account of her coloration and short, stumpy tail- glanced across the camp, then looked at the apprentices. "Where's Brackenpaw?" she inquired, narrowing her eyes.

"Still asleep," Redpaw informed her, flicking his tail towards the apprentices' den. Rabbittail laid back her ears.

"Did you not wake him?" she asked, her stumpy tail flicking back and forth with irritation.

Redpaw dipped his head. "We tried, but you know how he is. A fear of StarClan's wrath wouldn't wake him if he was still tired." Rabbittail rolled her eyes and looked at the other mentors.

"You four can go on without us," she sighed. "I'll have him hunt for the elders today instead." She turned and padded over to the apprentices' den.

Redpaw looked expectantly at Smokebreath, hoping the tom would tell him what the plans were for today, but Flowernose beat him to it.

"Today we're going to work on your tracking," she informed the apprentices, looking between Redpaw and Fernpaw.

"But it's soaking," Redpaw argued indignantly, laying back his ears. "All the scents will just be washed away!" Smokebreath snorted.

"That's the point," he replied, sitting down and wrapping his tail

around his paws. "If you can track even decently in rain like this, you'll be able to follow anything when it's dry."

"Exactly," Flowernose agreed with a nod to the tom. "We planned to start you off in pairs, with two of you tracking the other, so that maybe you could help each other if you got stuck." She glanced towards the apprentices' den. "But it seems like it'll have to just be us for now."

Smokebreath stretched. "Yeah, it was going to be just as much of a lesson on how to lose someone as how to find them, but I think since it's just the four of us that Flowernose or I will have to be the prey first." He looked at the she-cat. "What do you think?"

Flowernose thought for a moment. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. Then you can still work together. We'll just have to show you how to hide your trail another time."

"Alright then," Smokebreath meowed gruffly, straightening up and shaking out his fur. "I'll go ahead. You three wait here for... I don't know, a little bit. Then try to come find me." Flowernose nodded as the gray tom stepped out from under the bush, growling slightly to himself as the rain hit his pelt. He headed for the entrance to camp, then vanished into the grass beyond.

The three remained there for a bit in an easy silence. Redpaw watched the activities of the camp as they began for the day. A couple warriors nosed through the fresh-kill pile, then carried their prey to the shadows at the edges of the camp to eat. Dovekit poked her head out of the nursery, winkling her nose at the rain before disappearing back inside. Redpaw twitched his whiskers in amusement; who would have thought that the only thing that could keep the energetic kit from barreling out of the nursery as soon as the sun rose was a bit of rain.

"Calm your paws," Flowernose meowed after a moment, flicking Fernpaw- who had been kneading the ground impatiently since Smokebreath left- with her tail. "What if we were waiting to ambush something? You'd give us away immediately with your fidgeting."

Fernpaw groaned. "But I'm *bored*." The older she-cat rolled her eyes.

"Then you must find something to occupy your mind with." She gestured around the camp. "Even just here, there are lots of things you can think about. Like how to make the camp more defendable or what we could do if it started to flood."

"Or caught on fire," Redpaw murmured under his breath, too quiet for the others to hear.

"But those things are boring too," Fernpaw complained, her tail flicking back and forth. Flowernose let out a soft purr of laughter.

"You would think so, wouldn't you," she teased. "You scatterbrain." Then she flicked her tail, growing more serious. "But anyways, it's probably about time we get going. We don't want the scent to wash away too much before heading out."

Flowernose got to her paws and stretched, then headed up the slope to the top of the hollow where Smokebreath had disappeared. She stopped, waiting for the apprentices.

Redpaw hesitated before stepping out in the rain, but found once he did that it wasn't even as bad as it had been earlier. A few large raindrops soaked his pelt, but he was hardly drenched. He and Fernpaw went to stand by Flowernose, gazing at her expectantly.

The she-cat nodded at the ground and meowed, "When tracking in the rain, you'll have to keep your head closer to the ground. The water smothers the scent, so it doesn't waft up in the air like it normally does." She paused, thinking. "Also, the water might wash the soil carrying the scent around a little, so the trail can sometimes be a bit wider than normal. But of course, fainter." She paused again. "Heavy rain can wash scent right off of smooth surfaces like leaves and grass, though. So when tracking in the rain, you'll want to pay most attention to places like rocks, tree trunks, and the ground itself. And of course, anywhere that's dry, sheltered from the rain."

Redpaw dipped his head. "Got it." He glanced at Fernpaw, who nodded as well.

Flowernose flicked her tail, eyes bright. "Well, get to tracking them! The trail will only get fainter."

Fernpaw tilted her head. "Are you going to help us?" she asked. Flowernose shook her head.

"Not really. I'll follow a bit behind and offer guidance when I think you need it, but for the most part, you'll have to do this yourselves."

Fernpaw dipped her head at the she-cat, then lowered it so her muzzle almost touched the ground. Redpaw did the same, sniffing around the trail that led onto the moor. He could faintly smell Smokebreath, but the scent was stale jumbled with that of other cats.

"I think I caught his scent," Fernpaw mewed after a few heartbeats, standing a few tail-lengths down the trail from Redpaw. "It's faint but fresh."

Redpaw padded over and sniffed in the same spot. Sure enough, he could smell his mentor. The gray cat's trail veered off the path, onto the open moor.

"Come on," Redpaw meowed at his sister, flicking his tail and keeping his head low to the ground. Mostly he just smelled earth and water, but Smokebreath's scent, too, was woven through the grass. Fernpaw followed just behind Redpaw, keeping her head up to look out for obstacles while her brother followed the scent.

Before long, the ground dipped gently, and water had pooled slightly at the bottom of the small hollow. The trail led down into the mud, but the scent was too muddled for Redpaw to follow any longer. He straightened up and looked at Fernpaw, sighing.

"I lost it."

The ginger she-cat looked thoughtful. "Well, even if he went through the puddle, he had to come out somewhere, because he's not here." She flicked her tail. "So if we just sniff around the mud, we should be able to pick it up again."

Redpaw nodded, though he was a bit irritated at himself for not

thinking of that. Now that it was mentioned, it seemed like an obvious solution. "Alright, I'll go this way; you go the other way." He padded in a circle around the top of the dip to his right, and Fernpaw likewise went around the left, both of their heads lowered to the ground.

Once again, Fernpaw was the one who picked up the trail first, and so Redpaw let her do the scenting while he kept watch. *She must have a better sense of smell than me,* he thought, noticing that she was able to follow along much quicker than he had.

The trail led uphill, towards the highest point in the territory, but just before they reached the top, another scent hit them, overpowering Smokebreath's scent.

Fernpaw raised her head, blinking in confusion. "What is that?" she meowed, looking around. The scent was acrid, like carrion, but earthier. Redpaw looked back to see Flowernose approaching, looking concerned.

"What's-" she broke off as she caught wind of the scent too, and bristled, extending her claws. "Fox!"

"Do you think it's following Smokebreath?" Fernpaw asked worriedly, eyes wide. Flowernose raised her head and scented the air.

"I don't know," she admitted after a moment, looking at the two apprentices. "It looks like their trails head the same direction, but who can say what the fox was doing." She lashed her tail. "But we need to find Smokebreath quickly, just in case."

"The trail goes that way," Fernpaw meowed, flicking her tail in the direction the scents led- around the side of the hill, towards the ThunderClan border.

"Maybe the fox will have just left our territory," Redpaw hoped out loud as they set off warily.

"In a perfect world," Flowernose replied dryly, keeping her head raised and mouth open to follow the scent. It was fresh and strong;

no need to keep one's head low to the ground for this one. By now, the rain had nearly stopped as well, and the scent wouldn't fade as quickly.

As they rounded the hill, Redpaw heard an angry yowl: "Back off, carrion-breath!" He recognized the voice of Smokebreath, and went to rush to his mentor's aid, but Flowernose grabbed his tail in her teeth and jerked him back.

"We need to be careful!" she growled quietly. "Stay behind me." The tawny she-cat moved out in front, moving quickly but staying low to the ground, ears perked and pelt bristling. The ground sloped downward in front of them, and as he mounted the ridge Redpaw could see the gray pelt of his mentor. He crouched defensively in the grass as two large beasts circled him, their russet pelts bristling.

Those must be foxes. There's two of them! he thought hopelessly. How could the four of them fight of two foxes? Fernpaw and Redpaw had never fought when it really mattered before, and the animals were nearly twice the size of Smokebreath, with long snouts equipped with vicious teeth and thick fur that would be hard to bite through. They had Smokebreath surrounded; if he made a move to run, one of the foxes could catch him easily. As Redpaw watched, one darted forward and snapped at him, only to have its muzzle swiped by sharp claws. The fox whined and backed up a few steps, but didn't retreat entirely.

Flowernose beckoned the apprentices closer, gesturing for them to keep low and quiet.

"I'm going to ask one of you to do something very dangerous," she whispered, looking Redpaw in the eye, then Fernpaw. "So you have to be willing to do this." Redpaw hackles raised slightly with fear.

"What is it?"

Flowernose glanced at the standoff down below. "We're going to distract the foxes so that Smokebreath can escape." She looked back at the apprentices. "Ideally, you'll only need to put yourself in danger for a moment. I'll go down and attack one fox from behind, then run away and hope it chases me. You'll do the same to the

other. Once Smokebreath can get away without being captured, he should take the fox's attention back from you." She twitched her tail. "The other one needs to run back to camp as quickly as possible and get help."

"Fernpaw should go back to camp," Redpaw spoke up after a heartbeat. Fernpaw looked like she was going to protest, but Redpaw continued before she could. "Smokebreath's my mentor; I should be the one to help."

Flowernose dipped her head. "If you wish." She looked at Fernpaw. "Go. Quickly." Fernpaw looked distressed, but didn't make to argue anymore. Instead, she nodded and took off towards the camp.

Flowernose turned her attention back towards Smokebreath and the foxes. "I'll take the bigger one on the left," she meowed. "You take the smaller one. Just dart in and get its attention, then get out of there as fast as you can."

Redpaw took a deep breath. "Okay."

Flowernose nodded and crouched down, ready to launch herself down the hill. "On the count of three. One. Two."

Redpaw took another deep breath, his heart pounding.

"Three."

Chapter 2

[image]

"Three."

Redpaw launched himself down the hill, a pawstep behind Flowernose, his shoulder almost brushing against her tawny flank. They were nearly upon the foxes before the beasts noticed them.

As they neared the foxes, they veered apart- Redpaw heading for the smallest fox, Flowernose for the larger. Redpaw's target only noticed him at the last second, unable to turn around before the apprentice leaped and landed on the creature's lower back, digging his claws in for a heartbeat before pushing off and landing several tail-lengths away. The fox stumbled slightly with the force of Redpaw's push, but regained itself quickly and snapped at the young tom's tail. Redpaw hissed and clawed at its nose, drawing blood, before racing off across the grass. He slowed for a heartbeat to look over his shoulder, his breath catching in his throat as he saw the fox only a cat-length behind and gaining fast.

I can't outrun it, he realized, struggling not to panic as he felt the thrum of the fox's paws on the ground behind him. *Where's Smokebreath?*

As if on cue, Redpaw saw a flash of gray fur slam into the fox's side. The fox let out a short bark of surprise and stumbled to a stop, turning on the older tom, who hared off in the opposite direction. The fox gave chase, and Redpaw allowed himself to slow to a stop, breathing heavily.

I don't think I've ever run so fast in my life, he thought before glancing up the hill he and Flowernose had come down. *Where in StarClan is Fernpaw with the reinforcements?* But Redpaw didn't have time to linger on that thought; he heard a yowl of pain coming from across the field. The bigger fox had Flowernose in its jaws and was shaking her like prey.

It's going to break her neck! Redpaw realized with dread. Without thinking, he launched himself towards the fox, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat and throwing himself at the creature. He dug his claws into its shoulder and pulled himself onto its back.

The beast growled but didn't let go of Flowernose, who hung limp in its jaws with an expression of shock and terror on her face. Redpaw just hoped she wasn't dead yet.

"Let go of her!" he growled, lunging forward. His jaws met in its ear and the fox let out a whimper, dropping Flowernose, who lay still at its feet. It shook its head violently, trying to throw Redpaw off, but the apprentice held on tight. After a moment he let go and slipped off the fox's back. *I have to get it away from Flowernose.* He took off across the field, just like before, but he knew he wouldn't be able to outrun the fox for long. *I just hope help gets here in time.*

Just as he'd anticipated, the fox forgot about the tawny she-cat and took off after Redpaw. The young tom's stomach dropped as he realized this fox was faster than the other. *I'm not going to be able to stay ahead if it. I'll have to try something else.*

As he felt the fox's hot breath on his tail, he skidded to a stop and pushed himself back the way he came, throwing himself under the fox's belly and then out behind it. The fox skidded to a stop, momentarily bewildered, before whirling around and giving chase again.

I can't believe that worked! I don't know if it will again though; better not risk it.

This time, he threw himself to the side as the fox snapped at him, rolling to his paws and taking off again in another direction. He didn't gain as much ground this time, but at least the fox hadn't caught him yet.

I'm running out of ideas, he thought with alarm. But he didn't need any more. As he swerved again to avoid the fox's jaws, he saw several lithe shapes hurtle over the top of the hill.

"Flamefur!" Redpaw greeted his father breathlessly in relief as the

fluffy ginger tom ran up beside him.

"I'll take it from here. Keep running and don't stop until you're safe." With that, the warrior skidded to a stop and reared up on his hind legs, hissing and slashing his claws across the fox's nose. Heeding his father's word, Redpaw kept running.

He didn't stop until he reached the top of the hill. Looking down, he saw his Clanmates driving back the foxes. Smokebreath and Meadowpelt, a long-furred brown tabby she-cat, wove around the smallest fox, darting in to nip at its paws and neck until it turned and fled. Flamefur and Rabbittail clawed at the bigger one together, their movements in sync, as if they had fought together like this a thousand times before. After a moment, that fox too gave up and ran after the other, both of their tails between their legs. Mousewhisker, a white she-cat, was trying to rouse Flowernose, who stirred weakly.

She's not dead! Redpaw thought with relief. *But she might be badly hurt.* Now that the coast was clear, he descended the hill again, padded over to Mousewhisker and Flowernose. Flamefur, Rabbittail, Smokebreath, and Meadowpelt approached as well, breathless and bloody-clawed but unhurt.

"Is she alright?" Meadowpelt asked urgently, rushing over and nudging the fallen she-cat's shoulder. Redpaw remembered with a pang that Meadowpelt was Flowernose's mother. *It must hurt her to see her kit injured like this.*

Mousewhisker pushed Meadowpelt back gently as Flowernose groaned. "I think she'll be alright, but we need to get her back to camp so Rainheart can look at her. She's bleeding a lot." Sure enough, Flowernose's tawny pelt was soaked with blood from where the fox's teeth had torn her side.

"I'll carry her," Smokebreath offered. He was the biggest cat there, most suitable to take Flowernose's weight. "Help get her onto my shoulders." He crouched down beside the she-cat, lowering his head so that his chin nearly rested on the ground. Flamefur grasped her scruff gently and pulled her over Smokebreath's head and onto his shoulders, so that her paws dangled down on either side of him.

The gray tom stood with a slightly groan, and Meadowpelt hurried to his side to steady her daughter so she wouldn't slip from his shoulders.

Rabbittail nodded, standing on Smokebreath's other side. "Let's go. Quickly."

Mousewhisker moved ahead, scenting the air for any more dangers. Rabbittail and Meadowpelt followed closely behind, leaning slightly against Smokebreath to help support Flowernose, who seemed to be at least mostly unconscious. Flamefur brought up the rear, gesturing for Redpaw to come walk with him.

"You did very well today," he purred as the apprentice dropped into step beside him, his blue eyes sparkling with pride.

"If you hadn't shown up when you had, the fox would've gotten me," Redpaw admitted a bit sheepishly, looking at his paws. Flamefur gave him a nudge.

"Still, that was your first time seeing real combat, and you're not fully grown yet." He flicked one ear. "When your legs are longer, I'm sure you'll be able to outrun foxes just fine." Redpaw shrugged, not entirely convinced.

"Really, you'll be great." Flamefur nudged him again.

Redpaw was silent for a moment before asking, "Do you think Flowernose will be okay?"

Flamefur nodded. "Her wounds are pretty serious, but I've seen cats survive much worse. She'll heal just fine with Rainheart to look after her." He paused. "She probably won't be able to take Fernpaw out for a while though. Gorsestar might have to assign her a different mentor, at least until Flowernose heals."

Redpaw blinked. "Is that something that happens a lot?"

Flamefur shrugged. "I wouldn't say a lot. But sometimes apprentices have to change mentors part of the way through their training because their mentor dies or is injured, or has kits." He paused. "Did you know that Rabbittail was trained by Robintail *and* Gorsestar?"

Redpaw twitched his whiskers.

"No, I didn't." He tried to imagine the frail, blind old elder Robintail being formidable enough to train a warrior like Rabbittail.

Flamefur nodded. "That was before Robintail went blind. But when he did, he asked Gorsestar to take over Rabbittail's training. Gorsestar was still Gorseclaw then."

Redpaw flicked one ear. "I never realized Gorsestar was the one who trained Rabbittail. I guess it makes sense though; they're a lot alike."

By this time, the patrol was nearly back to the camp. Fernpaw was waiting impatiently by the entrance, and rushed over as soon as she saw them.

"Oh StarClan!" she gasped when she saw her mentor draped unconscious across Smokebreath's shoulders. "What happened?"

"Fox got 'er," Smokebreath replied, a bit winded from carrying the she-cat all the way back to camp.

"We're taking her to Rainheart's den now," Rabbittail meowed, gently nudging the worried apprentice out of the way.

"Will she be okay?" Fernpaw asked fretfully, dropping in with the patrol. She watched Flowernose with wide, anxious eyes.

"I think she'll be fine," Mousewhisker reassured her. "We just need to hurry. She's lost a lot of blood."

A few cats looked up as Flowernose was brought into the hollow. A surge of concerned whispers went through the camp as she was carried over to the medicine den, but then Redpaw's sight was blocked by a frantic brown she-cat rushing over to them.

"Thank StarClan you're okay!" she meowed, covering Redpaw with a flurry of worried licks. "I would have gone too but the rescue patrol left by the time I got back from the dawn patrol!"

"It's alright, Fawnfoot," Flamefur purred, nuzzling her back a bit to

give Redpaw some space to breathe. "Redpaw handled himself just fine." He glanced at Redpaw. "Bet he could've fought that fox off all on his own," he teased. Redpaw twitched his whiskers.

"I wouldn't-" but he was cut off by his mother's affection again.

"Oh my brave son! Growing up so fast," she purred. Redpaw looked around her shoulder to Flamefur for help again, but the ginger tom just shrugged, as if to say, 'you're on your own this time.'

"I helped too," Fernpaw muttered a bit indignantly. Fawnfoot purred and turned her attention to her other kit, giving her a loving nuzzle as well.

"You ran all the way back to camp for help, I heard," she meowed, giving her daughter a lick between the ears. "Faster than the wind, Sandshade said!" Fernpaw purred at the praise.

Redpaw twitched his whiskers in amusement. Fernpaw had always basked in praise, whereas Redpaw never liked to be the center of attention. Even at his apprenticing ceremony, he had been terribly awkward as the eyes of the Clan focused on him.

Just then, a small black-and-white she-cat emerged from the medicine den, and silence swept across the camp as they waited for the medicine cat's news about the injured warrior.

"Flowernose will live," the spotted she-cat announced, her small, light voice carrying easily in the hollow. A sigh of relief rippled through the Clan.

Rabbittail emerged from the medicine den behind the she-cat, and stooped to exchange a quiet word with her. Then she raised her head.

"We need to be sure the foxes have left the territory," she meowed. "I'm going to take a patrol to track them, and chase them out once and for all if they haven't left." She looked around at the cats in the camp. "Runningheart, Tansyspots, and Featherfur- you can come with me."

A long-furred calico she-cat and a small gray tabby she-cat-

Tansyspots and Featherfur- stopped sharing tongues and got to their paws. Runningheart, a bulky tawny tabby, finished the last few bites of his fresh-kill and joined them.

"Ready?" Rabbittail asked, looking them over. Each one nodded, and the patrol padded out of camp, heading for where the battle with the foxes had occurred.

Redpaw started as a voice sounded close to his ear. "You should eat and rest." He whipped his head around to see Smokebreath standing next to him, concern but pride in his pale green eyes.

Redpaw tilted his head. "Isn't there more training to do today?" he asked, twitching his tail. Smokebreath twitched his whiskers.

"You've done enough for now. A cat's first battle is always stressful and tiring." He flicked his tail. "But be ready for tonight; I'll take you night hunting once the sun sets."

"Ooh, can I go too?" Fernpaw asked eagerly, kneading the ground with her paws. Smokebreath looked thoughtful.

"I'll ask Flowernose later, if she's awake." Then he let out a purr of laughter. "But if she's not, I'll let you go anyways."

"Yes!" Fernpaw exclaimed triumphantly.

"Well, you better eat up and rest too then," Flamefur put in, giving his daughter an affectionate headbutt. "Go on." He nudged both the apprentices in the direction of the fresh-kill pile. Fawnfoot gave Redpaw another nuzzle as he passed her, and he purred back in response. Even though she could be a bit smothering at times, he was grateful for his mother's concern and love.

Fernpaw and Redpaw picked out a pair of birds and carried them over to the edge of camp, where a small pile of boulders rose against the sky. Climbing to the top, they settled down next to one another so that their pelts brushed.

The sky was still overcast, the world gray like twilight. The grass faded between greens and tawny, the yellow flowers of gorse and purple expanses of heather breaking up the landscape. As they

watched, a few narrow beams of shifting sunlight broke through the clouds, bathing the world in a faint golden light. As he took a bite of his fresh-kill, Redpaw couldn't help the purr growing in his throat. Despite everything- the foxes and the rain, and all the other hardships the Clan faced every day- he knew there was no place he would rather be than WindClan.

Chapter 3

[image]

Nearly a moon had passed since the incident with the foxes, and Redpaw had grown considerably in both size and confidence. He moved easily and quietly now, and Smokebreath thought him skilled enough now to venture forth from the camp on his own.

Redpaw raised his head to the breeze, and was greeted by the scent of rabbit. Peering over the tall grass, he could see black-tipped ears moving across the meadow not a treelength away. Lowering his head and laying back his ears so that the grass would disguise him, he padded slowly in that direction, careful not to move the grass anymore than the breeze. After a moment, he raised his head again to judge the distance between him and his prey, then charged.

His legs had grown longer in the last moon as well, and with a few bounds he was upon the startled rabbit. The prey hardly had the chance to run a tail-length before Redpaw leaped on its back and sank his teeth into the back of its neck. The rabbit dropped like a stone and didn't move again.

"Great catch!" meowed a voice admiringly. Redpaw looked up to see the medicine cat apprentice, Tabbypaw, sitting on a rock a short distance away, a few flowers resting at his white paws. "Makes me wish I'd chosen to become a warrior instead," he teased, tilting his head slightly.

Redpaw bent his head to give his ginger chest an embarrassed lick. He hadn't realized he had an audience.

"Heh, sorry to make you jealous," he replied. He'd never really spoken to Tabbypaw before; the brown-and-white tom had been made an apprentice when Redpaw was only a small kit, and they'd never worked together due to their separate roles as warrior and medicine cat.

"Nah, I'm only teasing," Tabbypaw purred, flicking his tail. "But I'm sure you realized that," he added as he got to his paws and stretched. Redpaw remained silent, not really sure how to respond.

"Still," Tabbypaw continued, his tail swishing back and forth. "I've always thought hunting would be a good skill to have, even as a medicine cat. Rainheart's never taught me though." He seemed almost inquiring as he gazed at Redpaw with large yellow eyes.

Redpaw shuffled his paws uncomfortably, not really sure what Tabbypaw wanted from him. "Um... I could teach you, if you wanted?" The older apprentice looked delighted.

"Would you really?"

Redpaw held back a sigh, not really sure what it was he was about to get into. "Sure."

"Wow," Tabbypaw meowed, seeming almost mystified. "That's never worked before." Redpaw narrowed his eyes, confused.

"Trying to get someone to teach me," the other apprentice elaborated. "I'm always asking, sometimes outright, sometimes indirectly, but no one ever wants to." He sighed. "They don't think it's necessary for a medicine cat to have even basic survival skills."

Redpaw flicked his tail. "I would think any cat should at least know how to hunt. You could have just asked though," he meowed playfully, relaxing slightly now that the medicine cat apprentice was being a bit less roundabout with what he wanted.

"Sorry," Tabbypaw replied a bit sheepishly. "I've never really talked to you so I wasn't sure what would be best."

"Well, now you know for future reference," Redpaw replied with a purr, picking up his rabbit and approaching the rock where Tabbypaw stood. He dug a shallow hole at the base of the rock and laid the fresh-kill inside, then covered it back over with a thin layer of soil to keep predators away until he was ready to return to camp.

"You should probably do something with those herbs while we're hunting too," he added, nodding towards the flowers at Tabbypaw's

paws. The young tom let out a meow of laughter.

"Oh, these? They're not herbs. I just like to pretend I'm doing something useful when I'm spying on cats." Redpaw twitched his whiskers.

"No, really."

"Really." The spotted tom just picked the flowers up in his jaws and tossed them into the wind. Redpaw watched as the petals danced on the breeze for a moment before falling silently among the grass.

This cat is weird, Redpaw thought, looking back at Tabbypaw. *But somehow it's an endearing sort of weird.* Outwardly, he just flicked his tail. "Well come on then. I'm sure both of our mentors will want us back in camp before too long."

Tabbypaw proved to be a fast learner. He'd mastered the hunting crouch before the shadows had lengthened more than two mouse-lengths, and not long after that managed to catch a small sparrow. In the meantime, Redpaw also managed to add to his collection of fresh-kill with a pair of plump blackbirds.

Despite Redpaw's reservation when he first agreed to teach Tabbypaw to hunt, he had a good time with the other apprentice. The medicine cat apprentice proved to be quite intelligent and agreeable, even if his sense of humor was a bit odd. The sun hovered only a tail-length above the horizon by the time they began heading back towards camp, the birds dangling from Redpaw's jaws and Tabbypaw dragging the rabbit along by the leg.

As they neared the camp, Redpaw could hear shouting. He exchanged a concerned glance with Tabbypaw and the two hurried along the trail to the entrance.

Rabbittail and Kestrelwing, the Clan's deputy, stood nearly muzzle to muzzle in the center of camp. Rabbittail's pelt bristled and her claws were half-unsheathed, but Kestrelwing looked calm, if a bit sad.

"-concerns are valid, Rabbittail," Redpaw heard the pale brown tom

meow. He paused, then looked around the camp. "I've made a decision."

Redpaw padded quietly down the slope into the hollow with Tabbypaw following close behind, both trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. But there was no point- all attention was focused on the deputy as he leapt onto Tallrock.

"I am going to move to the elders' den," he announced solemnly, looking around at the cats gathered in the camp. A few looked surprised, but others just nodded knowingly. Finally, his eyes met with Gorsestar's. The tawny-and-white she-cat had sat silently through the ordeal, half-hidden in the shadow of Tallrock.

"If that is truly your decision, I will honor it," she meowed, dipping her head to the tom. She got to her paws and jumped up on the rock beside him.

"Kestrelwing, is it your wish to give up the title of a warrior and go to join the elders?" She spoke the words solemnly and without hesitation, as if she had heard them spoken countless times before and now recited them almost without thought.

Kestrelwing nodded. "It is."

"Then I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest. The Clan honors you and the service you have given to us." She pressed her muzzle against the tom's forehead and he closed his eyes for a heartbeat, before opening them and slipping down from the rock.

"Kestrelwing! Kestrelwing!"

The chorus was not celebratory and joyful as it had been when Redpaw and Fernpaw had been apprenticed. Instead, it carried a solemnity and almost a sadness, as if lamenting the passing of Kestrelwing's youth. But Gorsestar didn't let the chanting last for long; after a few heartbeats, she raised her tail to signal for silence.

"The warrior code dictates that a new deputy must be chosen before moonhigh," she meowed, her voice echoing through the camp. "But the law of the code will not be a problem, for I feel as though the

choice for Kestrelwing's successor is obvious." Much of the Clan turned their gaze slowly to Rabbittail, who still stood in the center of camp where she had been arguing with Kestrelwing. She looked almost surprised, as if she were the only one who hadn't expected her to be chosen.

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve my choice." She paused for a moment, the light of the now-setting sun dying her pale fur red. "The new deputy of WindClan is Rabbittail."

For a heartbeat there was no cheering, even though it was obvious every cat supported the brown she-cat. Then, Kestrelwing called out.

"Rabbittail!"

Other joined in, and soon the whole Clan was calling out the new deputy's name in celebration. Even Redpaw set down his prey and joined in; as did Tabbypaw beside him. Brackenpaw, Rabbittail's apprentice, padded over and gave the she-cat and affectionate nuzzle. The other cats closed in soon enough as well, congratulating both her and Kestrelwing on their new ranks.

Redpaw wasn't so much one for crowds, so instead he took this opportunity to take his fresh-kill over to the pile. The birds and rabbit added to the pile significantly, and Tabbypaw looked thrilled at his contribution, meager as it was. He turned to Redpaw and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything he was interrupted by Frostflight, one of the senior warriors.

"Wow, quite the haul, Redpaw," he meowed, eyeing the pile appreciatively. Redpaw shuffled his paws.

"Tabbypaw actually caught the sparrow," he admitted, glancing at the other apprentice, who puffed out his chest.

"Yeah, Redpaw showed me how-" He was cut off by a sharp mew from behind.

"Is that what you were doing all day today instead of collecting

burnet like I told you?" Tabbypaw whipped around to face his mentor, Rainheart. Even though she was less than half his size, he cowered at her stern gaze.

"Um, well..."

"It's my fault." Redpaw stepped forward to defend the other apprentice. "I distracted him. I'm sorry."

Rainheart looked back and forth between the two apprentices, her blue eyes narrowed with anger. After a moment, she spoke.

"Apology accepted, Redpaw, but don't let it happen again," she mewed the younger tom. Turning to Tabbypaw, she continued more forcefully. "But you! You're old enough not to let yourself be distracted so easily!" She growled. "Well, tomorrow you'll be stuck in camp sorting herbs while I fetch the burnet." Tabbypaw averted his eyes, looking embarrassed, but didn't argue.

Mouse-dung! Redpaw thought. *I didn't mean to get him in trouble.* He looked apologetically at the other apprentice, but Tabbypaw didn't seem to notice. His gaze was fixed on his paws; he looked quite dejected.

By now, the crowd had begun to disperse, as cats retreated to their respective dens for the night or gathered beneath the sky to share tongues and eat. Featherfur, Fawnfoot, and Flamefur gathered near the entrance of camp to head out for the dusk patrol, passing Runningheart and his mate Rootfur as they returned from hunting, laden with prey.

Redpaw's attention was brought back to Rainheart as she spoke again, her blue eyes softer now but her voice still forceful.

"Well you may as well eat and go to bed," she told her apprentice, boxing his ears gently. "Not much more use can be made of this day." Redpaw felt that sticking around could only make things worse, so he dipped his head to the medicine cat and padded away, looking around for Fernpaw. He spotted her watching him from atop the rock pile overlooking the moor and leaped up beside her.

"I see you've made a friend today," she teased, green eyes bright as she looked down into the camp. Redpaw followed her gaze and saw that she was watching Tabbypaw, who was carrying the sparrow he had caught to the medicine den. He twitched his whiskers as he looked back at his sister.

"He's not half bad, actually," he meowed, sitting down beside her. "A bit odd, sure, but he's fun to be around."

"Aw, more fun than me?" Fernpaw meowed, falsely offended. She headbutted Redpaw's shoulder playfully.

"No, never," Redpaw purred, butting her back.

"Good, because then I'd have to claw your ears!" She pawed at her brother's ears, eyes glittering with mischief. Redpaw backed away a couple pawsteps and dropped into a crouch, tail-tip twitching as if he were going to attack.

"You'd attack me, your own brother?" he gasped teasingly, tail swishing back and forth over the rock.

"I would if he was a birdbrain," she replied good-naturedly, pouncing on him and gently nipping his ears. Redpaw rolled onto his back and battered her belly softly with his front paws, careful to keep his claws sheathed. It brought back memories of when they would play like this when they were still kits in the nursery; nowadays, it seemed like they were always too tired to play when they finished their duties.

"Ehem."

Both apprentices stopped as they heard the voice from the base of the rocks. Looking down, Redpaw saw Smokebreath standing below them, flicking his tail back and forth.

"Whenever you're done," he meowed sarcastically, appearing condescending but with an amused glint in his eye.

Fernpaw backed up and Redpaw rolled to his paws, sitting up and licking his chest fur in embarrassment.

Smokebreath twitched his whiskers. "Gorsestar wants you to join the Gathering patrol tomorrow," he meowed, looking at Redpaw, then Fernpaw. "Assuming you can both act like adults for a bit," he added teasingly.

Fernpaw sat up straight and puffed out her chest importantly. "Of course we can! We're honored to go!" She glanced at her littermate. "Right, Redpaw?"

"Of course," he replied, glancing at her before returning his gaze to his mentor. "We'll behave ourselves, we promise."

Smokebreath flicked his tail. "I'm sure you will. But anyways, you should both get some rest. I'll have you up early so we can get some training done in the morning and still have time for a nap before the Gathering," he explained, looking only at Redpaw now. "And I'm sure Hareclaw will do the same for you," he added, glancing at Fernpaw. Hareclaw was the warrior assigned as Fernpaw's temporary mentor while Flowernose was confined to the camp.

Redpaw nodded. "Okay, I'll head over to my den now." He glanced at his sister. "You?"

"I'll come too," she agreed. Under her breath she added, "But I might be too excited about tomorrow to sleep!" Smokebreath nodded, satisfied, and padded away.

Redpaw let out a yawn, suddenly tired at the prospect of sleep. "Alright, let's go," he meowed at Fernpaw, getting to his paws and stretching before jumping down to the ground. He waited for his sister to land beside him, then padded across the camp to the apprentices' den and slipped inside. As he curled up in his nest beside Fernpaw, he thought, *This has been an interesting day. I can only imagine what tomorrow will bring.*

Chapter 4

[image]

The next morning passed quickly but the afternoon seemed to stretch on forever. After battle training with Rabbittail, Brackenpaw, and their mentors, Redpaw and Fernpaw were sent off for a nap before that night's Gathering. Fernpaw just rolled around restlessly, unable to sleep, but Redpaw felt a sudden lull of drowsiness as he curled up in his nest.

He was a bit confused when he found himself standing on the open moor.

Looking quickly around himself, he realized that even though it was open fields, this wasn't a part of WindClan's territory. Dread filled him as he realized that despite this, he recognized the place. He'd been here hundreds of times before. Ever since he was a kit, this meadow had haunted his dreams. And he knew what was coming next.

He stepped aside as a huge black tom strolled past him, across the grass. From the other side of the field, a lithe brown tabby approached, followed by two more cats: a gray tom and a white she-cat. The gray tom seemed to be guarding the she-cat- or keeping her prisoner. She looked directly at Redpaw- as she always did- terror on her face as if silently begging for help. But Redpaw didn't move. He had learned that no matter how far he ran, he never got any closer to the cats in the middle of the field. There was nothing he could do but watch.

The brown tabby and black tom seemed to be speaking to each other, and after a moment, the black cat bristled and extended his claws. The other cat nodded to his gray accomplice, who in turn slashed his claws across the she-cat's throat.

The only sound that Redpaw ever heard in this dream was the sound of her scream, choked by her own blood.

Dozens of other cats now rushed around Redpaw, and in turn dozens came from over the hill. The armies- what else could one think to call them?- collided in a frenzy of screeching and clawing. Blood splattered the grass and collected in pools on the dirt before it was churned together by so many paws into a gory mud.

Redpaw tried to look away, but he couldn't. He was always forced to watch as cats the slaughtered each other for reasons unknown to him. And the battle seemed to drag on until countless bodies littered the meadow, a dozen or less survivors standing among the dead, panting and bloodied and barely able to stay on their paws. Redpaw closed his eyes for a moment, ready to wake up in his nest. This was where the dream always ended.

But it didn't. After a heartbeat, Redpaw opened his eyes once again to the battlefield and realized that the black tom from earlier was limping towards him, blood dripping from his pelt. Redpaw's heart beat faster in his chest. This had never happened before.

The tom came nearly nose to nose with Redpaw, his yellow eyes dull and almost lifeless, but he stared Redpaw in the eye as if to look into his very soul.

"Help us."

And with that, the dream faded.

Chapter 5

[image]

When Redpaw awoke, the sun was setting, streaking the sky with pink and orange. A few clouds drifted over the horizon, reflecting the sun's amber light and tinting the world sepia.

He lay still in his nest for a moment, willing his racing heart to slow. The dream was gone, but the memory of the black tom's almost pleading gaze was vivid in his mind.

What did he mean, 'help us?' Redpaw thought, bewildered. *I've never seen that before.* He wondered, not for the first time, if he was reading too much into what was just a recurring nightmare. But something in his gut told him that it was real. Somehow.

He pushed himself to his paws and shook his head to clear it, gazing out of the entrance to his den. The cats chosen to go to the Gathering were already assembling in the hollow, murmuring to one another excitedly. He realized now that Fernpaw had left his side, but he couldn't see her from where he sat. With a sigh, he got to his paws.

"Oh, you're going too?" Tabbypaw meowed with a purr, padding over to Redpaw as he emerged from the apprentices' den. Rainheart, who Tabbypaw had been sitting next to before, looked at Redpaw a bit disdainfully, obviously still bitter that he had distracted Tabbypaw from his burnet-fetching duties the previous day.

"Of course," Redpaw replied to the older tom, raising his tail in greeting. "Did the fact that Fernpaw's going not tip you off?" he added a bit humorously.

Tabbypaw snorted. "No, but I suppose it should have. You two are always together, after all."

Redpaw nodded. "Speaking of that, do you know where she is?" He

glanced back over at the cats milling about, but still he didn't see his littermate.

Tabbypaw looked thoughtful for a moment. "I think she went to go visit Flowernose before we go," he replied, glancing over his shoulder at the medicine den. "Perhaps-"

The brown-and-white apprentice broke off as Gorsestar stepped to the top of the hollow. The murmuring quieted as all cats looked expectantly at her.

"The moon has risen; we will go now." The tawny-and-white she-cat turned and padded out of the camp, heading towards the lakeshore. The other cats followed her in turn, slipping over the top of the hollow one by one. Rainheart flicked Tabbypaw's shoulder with her tail as she padded past.

"Come on; you don't want to be left behind."

The medicine cat apprentice glanced at Redpaw, angling his ears towards the crowd ahead. "Coming?"

Redpaw hesitated before following, glancing at the medicine den and wondering if he should go fetch Fernpaw. But the question was answered as the ginger she-cat emerged from the den, trotting over to Redpaw with a purr. Tabbypaw glanced at her, then Redpaw, before quickly following his mentor.

Redpaw watched him go before turning and greeting his sister with a friendly nudge. Then the two padded side-by-side after the rest of the patrol, pelts brushing.

"Aw, were you going to leave without me?" Fernpaw asked, false hurt coloring her voice.

"Of course not," Redpaw answered, flicking his tail. "If you hadn't come when you did, I would've gone to get you."

As they stepped to the top of the hill overlooking the lake, they stopped to take in all of the four territories spread out beyond. The hill sloped downward to the shore, where the ThunderClan cats were making their way towards the marsh where all the Clans

would cross a fallen log to the Gathering island. A few apprentices were scurrying around, pouncing on each other. One nearly rolled farther than a fox-length from the water's edge- custom dictated a cat must stay within that distance when traveling peacefully through another Clan's territory- and an older cat pulled them back by their scruff.

The water stretched away from the shore like a mirror, reflecting the stars and the full moon almost perfectly, like another sky in the center of the Clans' territories. Past the lake, Redpaw could see the distant outline of ShadowClan's pine forests. Redpaw had never seen the pines up close; between here and ShadowClan lay ThunderClan's lush deciduous forests, and Redpaw had never had any reason to trespass on their territory.

Redpaw's heart beat faster with excitement as they descended the hill; he and Fernpaw had only been to one Gathering before, when they were much younger, and they had hardly left Fawnfoot's side long enough to take in the island. This time, the two apprentices were much more independent, and planned on fully enjoying the night on their own.

The WindClan cats joined ThunderClan at the waterside, and the two Clans greeted each other warmly. Redpaw was surprised at the ease with which the two Clans' patrols merged together, cats from one Clan padded beside cats from the other, their pelts almost brushing. If any cat had not been familiar with cats from either Clan, they wouldn't have been able to tell the two apart.

But the Clans haven't always been this at peace with each other, he thought, remembering the one time he had encountered a ThunderClan patrol. The two border patrols gave each other wary glances and exchanged a few curt words, but all through their encounter pelts were hardly ruffled. Afterwards, Smokebreath told him that the Clans were in a time of peace almost unprecedented after the Great Journey.

I'm grateful I got to witness such times, Redpaw thought, watching Rabbittail conversing easily with a somewhat plump gray ThunderClan tom. *I can't even imagine how awful it is growing up in blood and battle. I hope it stays like this.*

Before long, the ground turned damp and soggy underpaw. Redpaw wrinkled his nose as water welled between his toes, and beside him Fernpaw lashed her tail irritably. However, their irritated soon disappeared as they spotted the RiverClan cats up ahead, crowded around the mainland-side end of the fallen log that served as a bridge to the Gathering island. Cats were crossing one by one and waiting for their Clanmates on the island's shore, or slipping into the darkness of the trees.

The WindClan and ThunderClan patrols joined RiverClan, and all the cats greeted each other as friends. Redpaw and Fernpaw hung back, unsure what to do as they didn't know any cats from the other Clans. Redpaw watched as Tabbypaw padded over and touched noses with a sleek brown RiverClan apprentice, exchanging excited words with him before they both disappeared into the crowd.

Glancing over at Fernpaw, Redpaw noticed she was kneading the ground anxiously, her green eyes round as she stared at the mass of cats.

"Scared?" Redpaw asked quietly, tilting his head slightly. The ginger she-cat sighed.

"No, just a bit nervous," she replied. "I don't know what we're supposed to do, and we don't have Fawnfoot or Flamefur here to guide us."

"I guess we just wait our turn to cross over," Redpaw replied, angling his ears towards the log. By now most of the RiverClan cats had crossed, and Gorsestar pushed forward as if to claim WindClan's right to go next.

"Come on," Redpaw heard Tansyspots mew walked past. Redpaw threw a glance at Fernpaw before following the calico she-cat, his littermate following in his pawsteps.

He watched as Rootfur, a small tabby she-cat from WindClan, jumped up on the log. It was solid under her paws, but the wood had been worn smooth by many moons of exposure to the wind and rain, and it was slippery from the water below. The she-cat began padding along carefully, not looking up from her paws. When she

was several tail-lengths from the shore, Featherfur climbed up as well. The log easily took the weight from both cats, as well as Mousewhisker when she joined them.

Soon, it was Redpaw and Fernpaw's turn. Redpaw nodded to Fernpaw to go ahead first, and she padded forward nervously, leaping up onto the log behind Hareclaw. She balanced easily, and after a few heartbeats it was Redpaw's turn.

He hesitated a moment before jumping up onto the log, teetering a bit before gaining his balance. He took a tentative step forward, extending his claws and digging them into the soft wood to steady himself.

He didn't look up until he found himself at the end of the log, staring down onto the pebbly shore of the Gathering island. Fernpaw waited eagerly, waving her tail in the air.

"Come on, slowpoke!" she purred. "Get down here so we can go exploring!"

Redpaw dropped down from the end of the log, landing lightly on the rounded stones below. Straightening up, he looked up and down the beach. A few cats were padding along, talking or poking at sticks or stones littered along the shore. The whole island was bathed in the silvery light of the full moon, which hovered just above the highest branches of the trees.

"Which way do you want to go first?" Redpaw asked, turning his gaze to Fernpaw. She looked around eagerly, lashing her tail excitedly, as if she couldn't quite decide.

"Hm," she murmured. "Let's go that way; there are less cats on that part of the shore," she meowed after a moment, pointing her tail west. Redpaw nodded and took the lead, treading carefully as the gray stones shifted beneath his paws. Fernpaw padded beside him, eyes wide, taking in every detail. They walked in silence, simply enjoying the cool ambiance of the night.

Suddenly, something dark burst out of the woods in the corner of Redpaw's eye, rushing towards them. He barely had time to respond

before the tiny black apprentice had barreled into his side, nearly knocking him to the ground.

"Got you!" she meowed, jumping back and crouching playfully, her round gray eyes sparkling with mischief. Redpaw narrowed his eyes, not really sure how he was supposed to react to the apprentice- who smelled of ThunderClan and couldn't be more than a half-moon out of the nursery- but he could hear Fernpaw purring with laughter next to him.

Another shape emerged from the trees- a little misty gray she-cat who looked like she was probably the black apprentice's littermate- and rushed over, nudging the other cat back.

"Are you trying to start a fight, Batpaw?" she meowed worriedly, then dipped her head to Redpaw. "I'm very sorry for my sister, she gets overly excited!" she apologized earnestly. Redpaw twitched his whiskers.

"Don't worry about it," he meowed to the gray she-kit, before turning his gaze to the black apprentice, Batpaw. He could see where she got the name- her ears were huge, and her pelt was short and sleek, like a bat's. "What I want to know, though," he continued, "is what a kit like you is doing unsupervised at a Gathering," he meowed half-teasingly. Batpaw growled good-naturedly, pushing past her sister and puffing out her chest importantly.

"I chased away a dog!" she announced proudly, obviously very pleased with herself. Redpaw narrowed his eyes.

Is she telling the truth? he thought, trying to imagine how the tiny, untrained she-cat could possibly scare away the huge slobbering beasts he'd heard dogs described as. His question was answered, however, as the gray apprentice rolled her eyes.

"It hardly counts!" she protested, nudging her sister again before looking at Redpaw and explaining, "It was a tiny thing as far as dogs go, no bigger than you." She threw a glance at Batpaw, as if putting her in her place, and added: "All Batpaw did was hide in a log and cry, lashing out until she got its nose and it gave up."

Batpaw bristled. "I was *not* crying!"

"Were too!"

Redpaw twitched his whiskers as Batpaw pounced on her littermate and the two dropped to the ground, rolling around and pawing at each other, angrily but with claws sheathed.

"Alright, so you scared away a tiny dog," Fernpaw laughed, darting forward and grabbing Batpaw by the scruff and lifting her in the air.

"Hey, put me down!" the little apprentice protested, paws churning in the air. Fernpaw laughed and let her down as the other apprentice- whose name Redpaw still didn't know- rolled to her paws, giggling.

"We should probably get to the clearing," Redpaw commented to Fernpaw, glancing at the sky. The moon was almost directly above, and he knew the leaders would probably start the announcements soon, if they hadn't already.

Fernpaw nodded in agreement, turning to the younger apprentices. "Alright, we have to go now. It was nice meeting you."

"Aw, you won't walk with us?" Batpaw complained, eyes wide and voice high and sweet. Redpaw glanced to Fernpaw, who just shrugged.

"Fine, we will, I guess," the ginger tom conceded, rolling his eyes.

"Yay!" Batpaw exclaimed, giving a small bounce of joy. "See, Mistpaw, didn't I say we'd make friends?" Mistpaw just snorted.

"I'm not sure pouncing on passerby and then acting cute so they'll walk with you counts as making friends." She pawed her sister's ear gently, claws sheathed. "Besides, we don't even know their names."

"Yeah, what are your names?" Batpaw asked, looking between the WindClan apprentices.

"I'm Fernpaw, and this is my brother Redpaw," Fernpaw meowed,

flicking her tail towards Redpaw as she spoke his name, who dipped his head.

"Well, we should go. I'm sure we're running out of time," the tom meowed, moving past the younger apprentices and up the slope to the edge of the trees. "Come on." Batpaw and Mistpaw bounded after him, their short, fluffy kit tails sticking up in the air excitedly. Fernpaw followed behind them, almost protectively, as if guarding the rear of a patrol.

The darkness under the trees made Redpaw a bit tense; despite the narrow beams of moonlight coming through gaps in the canopy of leaves above, he could hardly see anything, and could feel the presence of the foliage around him, oppressive and heavy like the earth in a rabbit burrow. He could hear the ThunderClan apprentices whispering to each other behind him, but he could see very little. Before long, he saw light up ahead- what he could only assume was the open clearing where the Gathering would really take place. He picked up his pace, wanting to get out the forest as quickly as possible.

He broke out of the trees, squinting slightly in the brightness of the clearing after the darkness of the forest. Silvery moonlight came down from above, illuminated the many cats that milled about in the clearing, and filtering through the branches of the giant oak that dominated the center of the clearing. Redpaw could see the shapes of three cats sitting in its low-hanging branches- three of the Clan leaders, but he could not tell which ones. *Good, they haven't started yet then.*

The ginger apprentice glanced pack as the other three emerged from the forest behind him. Batpaw and Mistpaw looked around with wide eyes and seemed to cringe back against the treeline, obviously nervous. Redpaw twitched his whiskers; he knew that one's first Gathering could be a bit overwhelming.

"There you are!"

Redpaw looked up as an unfamiliar voice rang out nearby, to see a pale silver tabby she-cat rushing over and giving Mistpaw, then Batpaw, and quick tap on the nose. "I've been looking for you two

all over!" The she-cat, who smelled of ThunderClan like the apprentices, glanced at Redpaw.

"Thanks for bringing them to the clearing," she meowed. "And you too," she added, looking at Fernpaw. "Redpaw and Fernpaw, right?" Both apprentices nodded. "I remember when your apprenticeship was announced a few moons ago." She twitched her whiskers. "I imagine you'll be earning your warrior names before too long, now."

Redpaw licked his chest in embarrassment, not especially enjoying the attention. Fernpaw, on the other paw, brightened and stepped forward. "It was no problem bringing them back; we were on our way anyways. And yes, the next time we're at a Gathering, our names won't be ending in paw!"

"Wow, you're going to be warriors soon?" Batpaw finally spoke up, nudging Redpaw, eyes round. "That's so cool! I want to earn my warrior name, Songfrost!" she exclaimed, looking at the ThunderClan warrior, who purred and nudged the little apprentice.

"You will soon enough. Now come along; the leaders will speak soon, and Branchleg is looking for you."

"Alright. See you, Redpaw and Fernpaw!" the black apprentice meowed cheerfully as Songfrost began to pad away. Mistpaw just dipped her head to the two and followed her sister.

"Well, that was... interesting," Redpaw meowed after a moment, looking at Fernpaw, who twitched her whiskers.

"It was. But they *are* rather endearing," she replied, watching as the three cats disappeared into the crowd.

Redpaw rolled his eyes, amused. "You always have such a soft spot for kits. Even obnoxious ones."

Fernpaw laughed. "What can I say, they're cute." She padded forward, flicking Redpaw's shoulder with her tail. "Now come on, we should go find our Clanmates and sit before the leaders start speaking."

Redpaw glanced over at the tree as he followed his littermate. As he watched, the final leader- a white-muzzled tortoiseshell tom- climbed up into the tree and sat next to Gorsestar. He was forced to look away as they reached the crowd and began to make their way between the other cats, careful not to tread on any tails or paws.

After a moment, Redpaw could make out the shape of Rootfur's ears above the crowd, and padded over to her. The brown tabby nodded as he sat down beside her, and Fernpaw beside him, then looked forward again, staring expectantly at the High Oak.

They didn't have to wait long before on of the leaders got to their paws and stepped forward, into a beam of moonlight. It was a heavy white-and-gray tom- Troutstar of RiverClan.

"It seems the past moon has been good for all the Clans," he began, eyes scanning the crowd. "Here I see a mass of sleek and well-fed cats, relaxed in each other's presence. This is good." He paused. "This moon, RiverClan was blessed with a new litter of kits; in fact, my own. Sweetblossom nurses Smokekit, Waterkit, Mistkit, and Ashkit." He paused again as a few murmurs of congratulations swept through the crowd before quieting again. "Also, I should warn ShadowClan: two dawns ago, Nutfur and Riverpetal chased a fox off our territory. It ran along the small thunderpath near the lakeside greenleaf twolegplace, and may have crossed into your territory." With that, he dipped his head and stepped back into the shadows of the branches. Now, Gorsestar stood, padding along the branch into the light.

"WindClan, too, had a run-in with foxes this moon," she announced. "Flowernose was wounded, but she is recovering well. This is thanks to Redpaw, who saved her." Redpaw blinked in surprise as the leader announced his name, his pelt growing uncomfortably hot as many eyes turned towards him. He felt a few gentle nudges of congratulations, but he was too self-conscious to respond. He was relieved as Gorsestar continued, taking the attention away from him.

"Smokebreath, Flamefur, Meadowpelt, and Rabbittail fought well also." She paused before continuing. "As for Rabbittail, she has been made WindClan's new deputy, as Kestrelwing decided to retire to

the elders' den." Once again, she paused to allow Rabbittail to be congratulated, then dipped her head and retreated.

Now, Stormstar of ThunderClan stepped forward, her shaggy gray pelt turned silver by the moonlight.

"ThunderClan had an encounter with two dogs this moon," she announced. "Clearheart, Daywhisker, and Rowanshade chased off the larger one, while the dog-kit was scared off by our brave new apprentice, Batpaw." Redpaw glanced around the find the little she-cat, but she was so small he couldn't see her through the crowd. Still, he knew she was probably very pleased with the praise.

"Her littermates Mistpaw and Smokepaw were apprenticed this moon as well," she continued. "That is all." She stepped back as the tortoiseshell tom Redpaw had seen earlier- Pinestar of ShadowClan- stepped passed Gorsestar.

"First of all, thank you for the warning about the fox, Troutstar," he meowed, dipping his head to the gray-and-white tom. "We had no run-in with enemies, but three of our apprentices have earned their warrior names. Spiderpaw, Pinkpaw, and Palepaw are now Spiderfang, Pinkpelt, and Palebelly." The crowd cheered for the three new warriors, who Redpaw could see sitting up proudly among the ShadowClan warriors. After a moment, attention returned to the tree. Pinestar glanced at the other leader, before continuing.

"That is all for this Gathering. May StarClan watch over all the Clans until the next full moon."

Chapter 6

[image]

Redpaw was up early the next day, opening his eyes as the first light broke through the branches of the apprentices' den. He left quietly, careful not to wake Fernpaw, who was still fast asleep beside him, and sat beside the entrance to the den to groom.

For some reason, despite being practically dead on his paws by the time the cats had gotten back to camp from the Gathering, Redpaw hadn't really been able to sleep. It wasn't nightmares that had woken him, as he had had no dreams that night. He just couldn't seem to get comfortable, like something was gnawing at him deep within his belly. He couldn't help but feel as though something was wrong; or at least, that something would be very wrong soon.

He pushed back that feeling as Smokebreath emerged from the warriors' den, gray pelt ruffled from sleep, and stumbled half-asleep over to the fresh-kill pile. Getting to his paws, Redpaw approached his mentor, who looking up and narrowed his eyes.

"You're up early today," he commented, returning his attention to the selection of prey.

Redpaw shrugged. "I couldn't really sleep." He paused. "What are we doing today?"

Smokebreath didn't reply for a minute, picking up a plump sparrow from the pile and carrying it over to the edge of camp, where dew-covered ferns sheltered a patch of soft sand. Redpaw followed as Smokebreath laid down and began to strip feathers off the bird.

"Hm," the older tom mused, biting into his breakfast and chewing slowly. "I hadn't really decided," he replied, swallowing. "I was going to talk to Rabbittail and Hareclaw about it when they got up."

Redpaw nodded, sitting down beside his mentor and wrapping his tail around his paws.

"What are you so eager for?" Smokebreath asked after a moment. Redpaw shrugged.

"Nothing really. Like I said, I just couldn't sleep."

Smokebreath gazed at him levelly for a moment. "Seems to me like you're trying to get your mind off something." Redpaw didn't reply, but averted his eyes.

"Did you meet a she-cat at the Gathering?" Smokebreath inquired, a bit of an amused glint in his green eyes.

"What? No!" Redpaw exclaimed, a bit defensively. *Why would he think that?*

Smokebreath just twitched his whiskers and let out a chuckle. "Well, I'll give you some advice." He leaned forward a bit. "It's so not worth breaking the warrior code over." Redpaw narrowed his eyes. *Sounds like he's speaking from experience.*

"I'll... keep that in mind," he replied awkwardly. *Why does he think THAT'S the problem? Ugh.*

Redpaw was saved from any more of that awkwardness as Fernpaw emerged from the apprentices' den, already groomed and ready for the day. She padded over and greeted Redpaw by touching her nose to his, then glanced at Smokebreath.

"Is Hareclaw up yet?" she asked, flicking her tail back and forth.

"He was just waking up when I left the den," Smokebreath replied, finishing off the last of his sparrow. "He should be out soon." He paused. "You two should probably get something to eat for now. You probably won't get another chance for a while."

Redpaw dipped his head and got to his paws, then went over to the fresh-kill pile, followed by Fernpaw. He picked a small vole off the top, while Fernpaw chose a blackbird, and the two padded side-by-side over to the boulder pile where they usually ate.

They were finishing up about the same time that Hareclaw emerged from his den. He went over to Smokebreath, who was grooming his gray pelt, and the two exchanged a few words. Fernpaw glanced at Redpaw, and the apprentices got to their paws and approached.

Hareclaw looked up as the two littermates came closer, looking a bit solemn but happy nonetheless.

"We've decided that your final assessment will be today," he announced, looking between them. Redpaw felt excitement course through him. "I'm going to ask Flowernose if she agrees, since she's really your mentor," he added, looking at Fernpaw, "but I'm sure she will."

"If you do well, you'll probably be warriors by tomorrow," Smokebreath put in, heaving himself to his paws.

"I'll go talk to Flowernose now; then we'll head out," Hareclaw meowed, making for the medicine cat den. Redpaw glanced at Fernpaw, who looked as excited as Redpaw felt, eyes shining. Redpaw couldn't help but feel a bit nervous as well, however. *What if I fail?* he thought with a prick of fear. *Or worse, what if I fail but Fernpaw doesn't?* He pushed the thought away. *No, I don't think that will be a problem. I'll be fine,* he assured himself.

Hareclaw returned a moment later. "Flowernose says to go ahead with it," he meowed brightly. "So that's that. Come on, let's go." Smokebreath nodded, then followed as the other warrior led the way up the slope and out of camp. Redpaw and Fernpaw padded after Smokebreath.

When they reached the moor, they stopped, and the mentors turned to the apprentices.

"Alright, first, you're going to trace the borders on your own," Hareclaw meowed. "Obviously you should know them by now, but this is just a general final assessment."

"You should also hunt if you happen to spot any prey while checking the borders," Smokebreath put in. "And if you run into any ThunderClan patrols or rogue cats, you'll have to deal with them

yourself. We'll only be watching, unless things get dangerous."

"But that shouldn't be a problem," Hareclaw assured. "So get going. You can start wherever you like."

Redpaw glanced at Fernpaw. "Where *should* we start?"

Fernpaw looked thoughtful for a moment. "How about where the Moonpool Stream runs into the lake?" she suggested. "Then we can go along the stream and around the territory from there until we get to the lakeshore by the twolegplace."

Redpaw nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

The two apprentices went ahead, their mentors following a couple treelengths behind. It didn't take long to get to the place Fernpaw had mentioned, and from there, they made their way upstream, refreshing the scent markers as they went.

A few treelengths from the lakeshore, Redpaw stopped. "I smell pheasant," he whispered to Fernpaw, laying back his ears and looking across the field for the bird. It was half a dozen foxlengths away, pecking at something in the grass. Its black-specked, dull brown feathers blended in well with the grass, so much that Redpaw had almost missed it.

"Well, Smokebreath said to hunt," Fernpaw replied quickly, nudging her brother, who nodded and dropped into a crouch. The ginger tom crept forward slowly, until he was sure the bird would see him if he got any closer. He paused, then launched himself forward, snagging the bird's wing with his claws as it tried to take off and pulling it back onto the ground. The bird was probably half his size, so Fernpaw ran forward and pinned its other wing to the ground as Redpaw darted forward and bit deep into its neck. The bird twitched once, then went limp.

"Thanks," Redpaw meowed breathlessly. "Might've gotten away if not for you."

"Nah, you had it," Fernpaw purred as Redpaw picked the bird up and carried it over to the base of a boulder, laying it in the shade

and pushing dirt and grass over it to keep it safe until they could come back to collect it later.

The rest of the patrol was more or less eventless. They met no ThunderClan patrols or rogue cats, and the rest of their prey- a young rabbit and a couple of sparrows- was easy to catch. Smokebreath and Hareclaw met them at the edge of the water, by the broken half-bridge.

"How did we do?" Fernpaw asked nervously as they approached the older cats, her tail flicking back and forth with nervousness.

"You'll just have to wait and see whether or not you get your names," Hareclaw teased, a playful glint in his eyes. Smokebreath flicked the other tom's muzzle with his tail, rolling his eyes.

"You did fine. I'm sure Gorsestar will want to give you your names today."

"Great!" Redpaw purred, nudging Fernpaw. "I guess we should probably go fetch our fresh-kill and go back to camp, huh?" He looked at Smokebreath inquiringly.

The gray warrior nodded. "You two go collect your prey; Hareclaw and I will report to Gorsestar. Go on now."

Fernpaw dipped her head and turned back the way they had come, bounding off up the slope. Redpaw followed, catching up to her easily. They slowed to a stop at the top of the hill, and Fernpaw padded over to where they had stowed the sparrows under a low-growing gorse bush. She picked the birds up by the legs and took off for where they had hidden the rabbit.

As he went to follow, Redpaw thought he heard a voice whisper on the wind.

"Redwing."

He paused, looking around in confusion, but saw no one. He shook his head and padded after Fernpaw, who was far ahead of him now, heading down the slope.

"Redwing!"

The voice was more forceful now, but still faint, as if calling from far away. Redpaw looked around again, scanning more closely. This time, he noticed the faint outline of a cat standing at the top of the hill. His eyes widened as he realized he could see *through* it.

"Redwing..." a voice murmured quietly, but he could feel the breath against his ear. He turned and found himself staring into round green eyes. A silver she-cat stood before him, her pelt almost seeming to glitter faintly with stars.

"Who are-" he started, but he was cut off as she spoke, her voice soft but urgent.

"You must find the sun," she whispered, lashing her tail.

"What?" he asked in desperate confusion as she began to fade. "Wait, who are you... what do you mean?"

"Find the sun, Redwing!"

And then she was gone.

Chapter 7

[image]

"You coming, Redpaw?"

Redpaw was jerked back to reality as he heard Fernpaw calling to him from the bottom of the hill. He hesitated, still staring at the place where the she-cat had vanished, before calling back.

"Yeah, sorry, I thought I smelled something."

He had paused a moment longer before bounding down the hill to join his sister, who looked concerned.

"What did you smell?" she asked, tilting her head. The sparrows were lying at her paws so she didn't have to speak around them.

"I thought I smelled fox for a moment, but I guess I'm just paranoid," he lied with a shaky laugh. Fernpaw narrowed her eyes, not looking entirely convinced, but fortunately didn't question him further.

"Come on, we should get back to camp as soon as possible," he meowed, pushing the encounter to the back of his mind. He'd freak out more about it later; for now, they had work to do. He moved past Fernpaw and headed along the bottom of the hill, retracing his steps from earlier so he could retrieve the rabbit they had caught. Fernpaw picked up the sparrows again and followed.

It was a bit past sunhigh by the time they reached the place by the stream where Redpaw had buried the pheasant, and their paws were beginning to become sore. He let out a sigh and plopped down in the shade of the boulder where he'd hidden the bird, laying on his side and stretching out his legs.

"Aw come on, you can't be *that* tired," Fernpaw meowed as she caught up, dropping the sparrows next to him.

"I'm sorry I don't have your boundless energy," Redpaw teased, arching his spine. After a moment, he forced himself to his paws and stretched again, then straightened up. "You're gonna have to get the rabbit," he told Fernpaw as he bent down to pick up the pheasant. The she-cat nodded and grabbed the rabbit by the leg, barely able to fit it in her mouth along with the small birds she had been carrying before. With a nod, Redpaw turned and led the way back to camp.

Smokebreath was waiting for them just outside the entrance to camp, and got to his paws as they approached.

"We spoke to Gorsestar. She said she would hold the ceremony as soon as you returned."

Redpaw exchanged an excited glance with Fernpaw, who looked like she was almost quivering with anticipation, her green eyes round and bright. Smokebreath twitched his whiskers and padded into camp, the apprentices following close behind.

Gorsestar was waiting in the shadow of Tallrock, and nodded to Smokebreath as he led them into camp. She leaped up onto the rock as Redpaw and Fernpaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile and dropped their prey on top.

"May all cats old enough to catch prey gather here in the clearing," she called, gazing around the camp. Cats emerged from the shadows around the edges curiously, gathering side by side beneath the sun. Redpaw noticed Flowernose appear from medicine cat den and join Hareclaw and Smokebreath at the base of Tallrock, looking proud despite her still-weakened state.

After a moment, the murmuring started to quiet, and Gorsestar beckoned Redpaw and Fernpaw forward with her tail. Redpaw's stomach tightened with nervousness as the other cats focused their gaze on him, but Fernpaw marched proudly beside him, almost glowing with joy.

The cats moved aside to make space for the two apprentices at the base of the rock, before their mentors and Gorsestar, who looked down solemnly at them, silhouetted by the bright sky.

"Today, I, Gorsestar of WindClan, call upon our warrior ancestors to look down upon these two apprentices," she began, looking up at the sky where the warriors of StarClan hid beyond the light. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of the warrior code, and I commend them to warriors in their turn." She looked down at Fernpaw, and Redpaw felt a slight shiver go through the she-cat. "Fernpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to defend this Clan, even if it costs you your life?"

Fernpaw nodded. "I do."

She turned her gaze to Redpaw now. "Redpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to defend this Clan, even if it costs you your life?" Redpaw hesitated for a moment, fully realizing the solemnity of this moment, and this promise, before replying, as all warriors before him had.

"I do."

Gorsestar's gaze lingered on him for a moment before she returned it to Fernpaw. "Then by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Fernpaw, from this moment onward you shall be known as Fernleap. StarClan honors your enthusiasm and intelligence." The tawny-and-white she-cat looked to Redpaw again. Before she spoke, though, he knew exactly what his name would be.

"Redpaw, from this moment onward, you shall be known as-" *Redwing*. "-Redwing." Instead of feeling joy at the sound of his new name, Redwing was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding. He pushed it to the back of his mind, trying to enjoy the moment for what it was.

"StarClan honors your courage and loyalty," Gorsestar was saying. "We welcome you both as full warriors of WindClan." The leader finished and stepped back as the Clan behind them began to call out Fernleap and Redwing's new names.

Fernleap glanced at her brother with bright eyes, but her expression of joy faded as she looked at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking concerned. Redwing shook his

head.

"Nothing, you know I'm just self-conscious," he lied, faking cheerfulness. Fernleap twitched her whiskers in amusement and said no more.

Redwing wasn't really sure why he was lying to Fernleap about his vision, but for some reason he didn't feel like he should tell her about it. Not yet at least.

Was that a StarClan warrior? And what did she mean, that I need to find the sun? He glanced up to where the sun was burning in the sky, narrowing his eyes. *I hardly think it's lost.*

The new warrior was pulled out of his thoughts as he was, as always, accosted by his mother's affection.

"Such a nice name she gave you!" Fawnfoot exclaimed, giving Redwing a lick between the ears. "I'm so proud!"

"You're always so proud," Redwing purred as Fawnfoot moved to Fernleap.

"That's because you two never give me a reason *not* to be proud of you," Fawnfoot replied with a laugh, nuzzling Fernleap's face. Redwing took advantage of Fawnfoot's distraction and slipped away, nodding in thanks to all the *congratulations* directed at him. He finally managed to escape the crowd and retreated to a quiet corner of the camp, hidden from the sun by tall grasses and brambles hanging over the side of the hollow. Redwing sat down with a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Wow, I can't believe you got your full name before me!"

Redwing jumped as he heard a voice from beside him, and opened his eyes to see Tabbypaw. He hadn't even seen the medicine cat sitting there when he'd come over, but somehow he didn't feel annoyed by the other tom's presence. If anything, he realized with surprise, he was pleased to see him.

"It seems I'm always making you jealous," Redwing replied with a purr, remembering the other day when they had first really spoken.

It sure has been an eventful few days, he realized. Rabbittail replacing Kestrelwing as deputy, the Gathering, and now Redwing and Fernleap becoming warriors had happened all in the span of a few days. Suddenly, he was grateful for a chance to relax for a moment.

"Nah, it usually takes medicine cats longer to get our full name than warriors anyways," Tabbypaw replied with a flick of his tail. "We have more to learn," he added teasingly.

"Except for hunting," Redwing purred, giving the medicine cat a nudge. "You should be getting burnet instead." Tabbypaw snorted, but apparently didn't have a clever response, instead just watching in silence as the crowd began to disburse, his yellow eyes sparkling.

As the camp quieted, Redwing's mind wandered back to earlier, to the silver StarClan cat on the moor. *Find the sun, she said... and she knew my name before I even received it... what does she mean? Who is she?*

"What's the matter?"

Redwing's thoughts were interrupted once again as Tabbypaw spoke, looking at the ginger tom with concern. Redwing licked his chest in embarrassment, realizing he had zoned out.

"Nothing," he lied, averting his gaze. *Wait. Tabbypaw is a medicine cat. Maybe he would know something about speaking to StarClan cats? That* is *half his job, anyways.*

"Actually..." he started, flicking his tail nervously. "Earlier, I had a... a vision." He looked up at the medicine cat apprentice tentatively, suddenly feeling self-conscious about it.

Tabbypaw narrowed his eyes and tilted his head slightly, wrapping his tail around his white paws. "What do you mean, a vision?" he asked, what sounded to Redwing like suspicion coloring his voice. The new warrior sighed.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he asked, looking at his paws. He was a bit startled as he felt Tabbypaw move closer, his pelt brushing against Redwing's.

"I can't really say unless you tell me about it," the medicine cat replied quietly. "What did you see?" He glanced out across the clearing, as if to make sure no one was listening in.

"Um... I was on the moor," Redwing started slowly.

"In a dream?" Tabbypaw asked, tilting his head. Redwing shook his head.

"No, earlier, during mine and Fernpaw, uh, Fern*leap*'s assessment." He paused. "Fernleap went a bit ahead, and then I heard, um, a voice."

Tabbypaw narrowed his eyes. "What did it say?"

"Redwing," the warrior replied quietly.

Tabbypaw blinked, looking surprised. "Are you sure?"

Redwing nodded. "And then it said it again. And when I looked up, I saw a cat standing on the top of the hill. And then, I heard my name again, whispered in my ear, and when I turned, she was standing as close to me as you are."

"She?" Tabbypaw tilted his head.

"Yes." Redwing nodded. "A she-cat with light silver fur, probably a bit smaller than you, with bright green eyes. And she said..." Redwing hesitated. "She told me to 'find the sun.'"

Redwing felt unease growing in his belly as Tabbypaw said nothing, instead narrowing his eyes and gazing across the camp, looking to be deep in thought. Redwing shuffled his paws nervously, not sure what else to say.

"Do you have *any* idea who she is or what she means?" Tabbypaw asked quietly after a moment. Redwing blinked.

"No." *If I did I wouldn't have to ask you.*

Tabbypaw was silent for a moment longer, seeming lost in thought. Redwing shifted slightly, feeling both uncomfortable and a bit

hopeless.

"If you want to know the truth," Tabbypaw meowed with a sigh after several uneasy heartbeats, "I've never actually received a vision from StarlClan." Redwing blinked, a bit surprised.

"You've never spoken with StarClan?" he asked. "I thought that was the point of going to the Moonpool on the half moon."

Tabbypaw flicked his tail. "Yes, I've *spoken* with StarClan cats. But that's all. No prophecies or visions or strange dreams. So when it comes to that, I'm just as clueless as you are."

"So you've never seen the cat from my vision in your visits with StarClan?" Redwing prompted, not wanting to be pushy but desperately wanting some kind of answer.

Tabbypaw shrugged. "I've seen lots of silver she-cats with green eyes. So maybe I have, but I'd have no way of knowing unless I saw her myself."

Redwing let out a sigh, suddenly feeling as hopeless as he did confused. "What should I do?" he asked, defeat and even a note of desperation coloring his voice.

"That's for you to decide," Tabbypaw answered quietly.

Should I tell Gorsestar? Or Rainheart? Or should I keep it to myself? Redwing's mind whirled as the two cats lapsed into silence. *Was it a mistake to tell Tabbypaw?* He had no idea how he should deal with this, especially when he had no answers or even a place to start looking for some. This conversation had gotten him nowhere, and he wasn't even entirely sure he could trust the medicine cat apprentice to keep his secret.

Yes, it will *be my secret,* he decided. *For now, at least. I won't tell anyone else, not until I have something to go on.*

"There you are, Redwing!"

The ginger tom looked up as he heard Fernleap's voice to see her approaching. She threw a strange glance at Tabbypaw, and

Redwing felt his pelt grow a bit hot as he realized how close he was sitting to the other tom, practically pressed against his side. He shifted awkwardly, putting a few inches between then, then purred in greeting to his littermate.

"What are you two up to?" Fernleap asked, coming to stand next to Redwing. She sounded almost suspicious; Redwing hoped he didn't look guilty. He certainly *felt* guilty keeping the vision a secret from his sister, but something told him she shouldn't know yet.

"Redwing was just promising to help me fetch herbs tomorrow," Tabbypaw put in, saving Redwing from having to come up with a lie. "To help make up for getting me in trouble the other day," he added, with an amused glance at Redwing.

Fernleap twitched her whiskers. "Well, for now, Gorsestar wants us to start our vigil since it's getting dark."

Redwing got quickly to his paws, having completely forgotten about the vigil, focused as he had been on his vision. "Oh, of course." He dipped his head to Tabbypaw. "See you tomorrow then, I guess."

Tabbypaw nodded, eyes sparkling, whether with amusement or something else- Redwing wasn't sure. Either way, Fernleap was nudging the ginger tom towards the entrance of camp now, so he didn't think about it too much.

Redwing and Fernleap sat down on opposite sides of the entrance to the camp, which was now mostly empty. Redwing looked up to the sky, where the last reds and pinks of sunset were fading on the horizon, leaving the rest of the sky gray and dark. It was a bit overcast now, covering the moon and the warriors of StarClan. Redwing felt a twinge of anxiety at the thought of separation from his warrior ancestors, and his mind again drifted back to the silver she-cat and her words.

She knew my name, he thought, shifting uncomfortably. He wasn't sure why, but that fact in particular gave him an uneasy feeling. It felt significant, even though logically it seemed like a minor detail.

No, StarClan cats give prophecies all the time. If they can see entire

futures laid out before them, I'm sure seeing what name a cat will receive later that day is a small matter, he reasoned with himself. *That's all it is, I'm sure.*

Chapter 8

[image]

Redwing was nearly asleep on his paws as the first rays of sunlight broke over the horizon. He was relieved as Gorsestar emerged from her den and padded up the slope to where he and Fernleap sat on either side of the camp entrance, her clear blue eyes sparkling with what looked like amusement.

"Your vigil may end now, with dawn's light," the leader meowed, glancing to the sunrise. "You should go sleep, you both look exhausted."

Redwing dipped his head and got to his paws, wincing as he stretched his stiff limbs. Fernleap did the same, arching her spine in a luxurious stretch before following her brother to the warriors' den.

The two warriors padded into the den warily. They had only been inside a pawful of times before, but now they would need to find a place to make new nests. *Perhaps we should have claimed sleeping spots before our vigil last night, instead of waiting until now. Then we would have warm nests already waiting.* Still, Redwing couldn't bring himself to regret his conversation with Tabbypaw.

Most of the den was occupied by sleeping cats, and the rest by nests recently vacated by warriors now on early patrols. Redwing narrowed his eyes in the darkness as he picked his way between the older warriors, careful not to trod on a tail or paw as he searched for an open space big enough for himself and Fernleap. Finally they came to a spot at the rear of the den, where a slight hole in the branches created an uncomfortable draft. It wasn't the most

desirable place in the den, but it would suffice. *I'm so tired I could sleep on the lakeshore if I had to. This will do for now.*

"Maybe another time we can patch up that hole," Fernleap whispered, coming to stand next to Redwing, who nodded. Together they managed to scrape up enough stray moss and leaves to make a nest and curled up with their backs pressed together, hiding their noses beneath their tails to block out the faint dawn light that was now beginning to stream through the entrance and branches of the den, giving the world a faint, shadowless gray glow. Before he knew it, Redwing drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

The den was nearly empty when Redwing awoke. Strong morning light flooded the den, and the tom could hear birdsong from the distant forest. *I can't have slept all that long, then,* he thought as he got to his paws. Still, he felt refreshed. I may need to go back to sleep earlier than usual, but I should be good for most of the day. Fernleap still lay curled in her side of the nest, snoring softly. Redwing watched the gentle rise and fall of her flank for a moment, affection for his littermate welling in his chest, then turned and quietly padded out of the den, careful not to wake any of the few cats who remained, asleep.

He blinked as emerged from the darkness, narrowing his eyes against the bright sunlight. The sky was cloudless, but by the scent of the earth he could tell it had drizzled earlier, and the world felt fresh and rejuvenated. The sun was warm, but the air was cooled by the rain and a light wind that spoke of the coming leaf-fall. Redwing felt surprisingly alive; refreshed from his nap and the nice climate of the day, he felt strangely hopeful. *Today will be a good day, I think.*

After a heartbeat, the ginger tom padded towards the medicine den in search of Tabbypaw, remembering that he was supposed to help the medicine cat apprentice search for herbs today. Once, he may have been resentful of the task, but now he found himself looking forward to the easy work and the idea of spending more time with his new friend. The last few days had been quite eventful, after all, and he would welcome a chance to take it easy.

Poking his head into the medicine den, Redwing only found

Flowernose snoring gently in the corner. Her shoulders and flank were scarred and furless from the terrible wounds the fox had given her, but besides the visual damage and a slight limp she would carry for the rest of her life, she had healed well over the past moon. The Clan was hopeful she would soon be able to return to her duties as a warrior.

Redwing was careful not to wake her as he sniffed the air; Tabbypaw and Rainheart's scents were fairly fresh, though outside they were dulled by the early morning drizzle. They must have set out shortly after dawn, though where to, Redwing couldn't guess.

Hm, guess I won't be helping Tabbypaw today after all, he thought, padding away from the den. He paused in the shadow of Tallrock, considering what he should do now. After a heartbeat, a low grumble in his belly reminded him that he hadn't eaten since earlier the previous day, and he suddenly became aware of a gnawing hunger. *Well, I guess that's the first thing, huh?*

Redwing had chosen a plump starling and settled down in a dry spot sheltered by low-handing brambles to eat when Fernleap emerged from the warriors' den, still looking a tad sleepy but bright-eyed and freshly groomed nonetheless. She retrieved prey likewise and padded over to join him in the shade.

"I thought you would be out with Tabbypaw by now," Fernleap commented through the fur of the mouse she carried, twitching her whiskers as she settled down.

"He's not in camp," Redwing replied, flicking his tail. "I guess he and Rainheart went out together. That frees up my day for other things, though."

Fernleap looked thoughtful. "What should we do, do you think? We don't have apprentice duties any more, so we kind of have to find our own work now, unless Rabbittail sends us out on a patrol."

"Yeah, and I haven't seen her yet either," Redwing meowed as he finished the last few bites of his fresh-kill. "She must have gone out with a patrol earlier."

"Hm. Well, what do you want to do, then?"

Redwing scraped earth over the remains of his prey, looking thoughtful as he did so. "Well... there are probably already plenty of border patrols out, otherwise Rabbittail wouldn't have left camp. So we could hunt, I guess." He glanced around Fernleap, to the fresh-kill pile. "Looks like we're a little low on prey, though it's nothing urgent. So we could always just wait around here until the evening patrols."

Fernleap shook her head. "No, I'm antsy. We can always do a quick hunt, and maybe we'll be back in time for the patrols later."

Redwing nodded. "Sounds like a plan." *Though I didn't mean to make it sound as though I'm* eager *to go on a patrol later!*

Once Fernleap finished her breakfast the littermates got to their paws and padded up the slope. Just outside the camp, they paused, scenting the air.

"Where should we hunt?" Fernleap meowed, glancing at Redwing.

"You don't need to ask my opinion for everything," Redwing teased in response, then added, "I don't really care where we hunt; wherever you want."

Fernleap narrowed her eyes, looking out across the moor. "How about by the twolegplace border? There was pretty good prey there yesterday."

Redwing hesitated. That's where I saw the StarClan cat, he thought, suddenly filled with a sense of dread. His good sleep and the calmness of the day had driven the event from his mind, but now that he remembered, he had to forcibly prevent himself from bristling. After a heartbeat, he nodded. "Yeah, that works."

Fernleap gazed at him for a moment longer, a look of mild concern in her green eyes, but then she turned away, heading towards the aforementioned border. Redwing was relieved she didn't question him, though he could almost feel her suspicion of him growing.

Like the day before, they went near the border and followed it to

the lakeshore. Their hunt was mostly uneventful; they caught some small prey, but nothing especially noteworthy, nor were any of the catches especially difficult. Redwing felt discomfort growing in his belly as Fernleap remained quiet; he felt as though there was a sudden distance between them. *Does she know I'm hiding something from her? Or do I just feel guilty because I am?*

They passed the hill where the silver cat had appeared without incident, though the area was strangely devoid of life; not even a bird or mouse flitted or scurried among the grass. Redwing couldn't stop his heart from pounding until they were well past it, the silver-flecked pelt of the lake stretching out down a short slope from them. They paused for a moment, laying down their fresh-kill to rest their paws and jaws for a few heartbeats.

In the silence, Redwing heard a shrill shriek carried on the wind from the lakeshore. He whipped his head around, pricking his ears; he could see Fernleap heard it too. They stood still and tense for a moment, listening for it again. After a moment, it sounded again, faintly carried on the breeze.

"Help!"

Fernleap's eyes widened as she looked at Redwing. "That sounds like a kit!"

"What's a kit doing out of camp?" the tom exclaimed, then shook his head. "No, doesn't matter, let's go." He took off down the hill, abandoning their prey- for a heartbeat, he thought, *I hope nothing takes it before we can come back to it,* but then that thought was pushed away as he strained his senses for any sign of the kit in danger.

They rounded a bend on the shore just as the voice cried out again. Standing on the pebbles, a couple tail-lengths from the water's edge, was Dovekit. The little she-kit looked terrified, her blue-gray eyes round with fear and her fluffy tawny pelt bristling. She jumped as she saw the warriors approach, then ran over to them as the trotted to a halt, her tail between her legs.

"It's Grousekit!" she cried before they could ask what the problem

was, glancing towards the lake. "He's drowning!"

Redwing looked at the water, seeing no sign of the other kit. He must already be submerged. He bounded towards the water's edge without any other questions- they could wait until the kits were safe. If it wasn't too late already.

Redwing paused as he set one paw in the water, wincing at its chill. It already seemed to carry the bite of leafbare, even though that was still several moons away. He ignored his discomfort, trying to spot any clue as to where the kit might be under the water. After a heartbeat he spotted some bubbles rising to surface. *I hope that's him and not a fish.* Then he dived in.

In a couple bounds, the water was up to Redwing's belly, then his shoulders, then deep enough to cover his head. He pushed himself towards what he hoped was Grousekit, shivering and blinded by the water. He could see a dark shape just ahead of him, and reached forward. His muzzle brushed sodden fur and he grabbed on, slamming his paws against the pebbles at the bottom to push him and the kit towards the surface and the shore. It hadn't been more than a few heartbeats, yet he could feel his lungs screaming for air. He had never had to swim or even hold his breath before.

Redwing's head broke the surface and sunlight blinded him. Water streamed into his nostrils, and wet fur choked his mouth. Stumbled forward, he felt fur press against his side, guiding him towards the shore and taking some of the weight of the limp kit. He blinked, the world blurry around him as he stepped out of the water, dropping the kit on the pebbles and gasping for breath as Fernleap pushed him aside so she could take care of the kit.

"Quick, Dovekit, lick his fur," he could hear Fernleap ordering. He coughed, then snorted to try to get the water out of his nose. He blinked a few more times, but his vision was still blurry. His eyes stung from the water.

"Is he okay?" Redwing panted, unable to see or smell or even really hear much of anything.

"He's not breathing!" Fernleap replied, poorly concealed panic

coloring her voice. "I don't know what to do!" Redwing shook his head to clear it, trying to think of everything he knew about treating a drowning cat, but that wasn't usually a problem in WindClan; not enough for anyone other than the medicine cats to know much of anything. *I wish Tabbypaw was here.*

Press on his chest to force the water out.

The voice was nearly too faint to make out, and Redwing almost couldn't tell whether it was whispered on the breeze or in his head. He felt a twinge of fear, remembering the day before, but had no time to dwell on it as he stepped forward, brushing past Fernleap, and did as the voice commanded. Water flooded from Grousekit's jaws as Redwing put pressure on his chest, and then he let out a faint cough, gasping, but there was still too much water in his lungs for him to breathe properly, and he wasn't concious or strong enough to cough it up himself. Not sure what else to do, Redwing let up, then pushed again. Grousekit coughed up more water, but didn't take a breath.

Once more.

This time, Grousekit coughed violently and then took a shuddering, gasping breath. Redwing heard Fernleap sigh faintly with relief; then Dovekit rushed over to her littermate, nudging him with concern.

"Grousekit! Are you okay?"

"He's still unconcious," Redwing meowed gently, pushing Dovekit back as Grousekit's coughing and wheezing started to soften. "Give him some space."

After a few moments, the kit's breathing began to steady and he stirred slightly.

"We should get him back to camp," Fernleap meowed, glancing at Redwing, who was shivering slightly. The cold of his sodden fur, only made worse by the chilly breeze blowing off the water, had begun to chill him to the bone. Redwing nodded at Fernleaps comment, and the she-cat stepped forward and picked up Grousekit

by the scruff. The kit looked small and frail with his black fur plastered against his body, but Redwing was hopeful he would survive.

"Come on," he meowed to Dovekit, then followed Fernleap up the slope, towards the camp. Dovekit was uncharacteristically quiet as they padded along, then looked up at Redwing.

"Thank you for saving my brother," she meowed solemnly.

Redwing blinked. "It's not like I would've just let him drown...." he paused. "What were you two doing by the lake, anyways?"

Dovekit looked at the ground. "We wanted to see what it looked like. Then Grousekit said he heard RiverClan cats catch fish in the water and he wanted to try. Then a wave swept him off his paws and dragged him into the water...."

"There's a reason kits are supposed to stay in camp," Redwing chastised gently. "You learned it today, I hope." Dovekit just nodded, silent.

"Oh my StarClan... What happened?"

Redwing looked up as he heard a panicked voice. Sandshade- Dovekit and Grousekit's mother- was rushing towards them, eyes wide with worry as she saw Grousekit limp in Fernleap's jaws. Skysong followed behind, looking concerned.

"They were by the lake. Grousekit fell in," Redwing informed the queen, stepping forward to stand next to Fernleap.

"I-is he okay?" the she-cat meowed, her voice shaky. Redwing flicked his tail.

"I think so... I got him out, and we got him breathing again, but more than that I don't know."

"Thank you!" Sandshade exclaimed, then looked at Fernleap. "Thank you... I'll take him from here. We need to go to Rainheart's den... and you-" She fixed her eyes on Dovekit, who was half-cowering behind Redwing's leg, "-need to go straight to the nursery! And

don't leave until I come back." Her tone was sharp, but her eyes were soft, obviously relieved that Dovekit wasn't hurt too.

"You should go to Rainheart as well," Skysong meowed, padding up to the rest of the group more slowly. He eyed Redwing, who was still shivering, his thick pelt was just beginning to dry.

Redwing shook his head. "I'll be fine."

The smaller gray tom snorted. "You won't be saying that when you catch a cough." He glanced at the she-cats- Sandshade was now the one carrying Grousekit- and flicked his tail. "Come on, let's hurry back."

Chapter 9

[image]

The small interior of the medicine den was crowded with bodies and the intertwining scents of herbs and wet fur. Rainheart looked over Grousekit, who still hadn't woken up, though the medicine cat assured them the kit would probably survive. Sandshade stood protectively over her unconcious kit, her tail flicking back and forth nervously as she licked him continuously to keep him warm. Dovekit had been sent back to the nursery, and Skysong had parted with the rest of the "patrol" once they reached the camp, his goal of locating the missing kits complete; Fernleap soon thereafter had been sent on a border patrol. Redwing was left waiting patiently as Rainheart sent Tabbypaw scurrying back and forth across the den, fetching this and that.

Though the water had mostly evaporated from the warmth of the den and the body heat of the cats that crowded it, making the air somewhat stifling and humid, it left Redwing's pelt damp, frizzy, and sticking up in clumps. By the time they had brought Grousekit back to camp, Redwing felt a tickle in the back of his throat, causing him to intermittently cough and sneeze, and though he didn't look forward to being treated with the strong-smelling herbs the medicine cats used, he knew he had no choice but to wait for them to see him, or he would end up with a cough.

Once Grousekit was deemed stable, Rainheart sent Tabbypaw over to look at Redwing, who, despite his efforts to contain it, let out a loud sneeze just as the medicine cat apprentice approached.

"Sounds like you're coming down with a cough," the brown and white tom mewed, looking Redwing up and down with what almost looked like worry lighting his yellow eyes. "You shouldn't let your

pelt stay wet for so long; didn't you make any attempt to dry it?" Tabbypaw eyed him disapprovingly, then pressed against Redwing's side to lend his warmth and began licking the warrior's pelt the wrong way to help dry it. Redwing felt his ears grow hot, though he wasn't really sure why; still, he felt strangely comforted by Tabbypaw's fussing, which almost reminded him of Fawnfoot, and allowed his gentle grooming to lull him into a sort of doze.

After a moment, though, his peace was interrupted by another fit of coughing, making Tabbypaw jump in surprise. Redwing couldn't help but twitch his whiskers in amusement as the older tom licked his chest in embarrassment.

"Here, let me listen to your breathing. Maybe there's something I can give you for that cough," Tabbypaw meowed, shaking slight to cast of his momentary surprise. Redwing dipped his head, and Tabbypaw crouched to press his ear against the other tom's chest. "Take a deep breath." Redwing did so, and Tabbypaw listened intently as he breathed, then he straightened up, eyes narrowed with thought.

"I can give you some juniper berries, but I want to ask Rainheart first; I'm not sure if they'd help you in this situation." He paused, thinking more. "There's also chamomile to keep your strength up, but we don't have much of it, so unless your cough starts to worsen Rainheart will probably tell me to refrain from giving it to you."

Redwing nodded; as greenleaf turned to leaf-fall, the medicine cats would want to save their stores of herbs for emergencies. "Well, go ask her then. Looks like she's done with Grousekit." Rainheart looked up from the other side of the den, as if sensing they were talking about her.

"What do you need?" she asked, padding over and looking at Tabbypaw, almost completely ignoring Redwing.

"He's getting a cough. I was thinking maybe juniper berr-"

"No," Rainheart interrupted, "you'll want tansy. Juniper is for difficulty breathing, not coughs and irritated throats. You ought to know this by now," she chastised, lashing her tail once with

irritation.

Tabbypaw laid back his ears and averted his eyes. "Sorry.... I'll do better next time." Rainheart gazed at him a moment, then her hard gaze softened.

"I don't mean to snap at you Tabbypaw, but you need to know this," she meowed, her tone gentler now. "The Clan could lose me at any moment and you need to be ready to take my place." Her voice was sterner as she added, "You can't afford to make mistakes."

Didn't Flamefur say Rainheart's mentor died before she finished her training? Redwing recalled. *That must be why she's so hard on Tabbypaw,* he realized. He remained silent throughout the exchange between the medicine cats, feeling as though he was intruding on something. Then Rainheart looked at him, narrowing her eyes as she looked him up and down.

"It was good of you to risk yourself to save Grousekit," she meowed after a heartbeat. "He barely made it; a moment of hesitation and he wouldn't be here now." She paused, a flicker of amusement in her eye. "That's two cats who have ended up in my den owing you their lives this past moon. You seem to be making a habit of it."

Redwing blinked, not really sure whether that was a praise or not, then dipped his head. "My vow as a warrior would mean nothing if I had just left Grousekit or Flowernose to die because I was too scared to risk myself." Rainheart looked at him levelly for a moment, then let out a snort.

"No, I guess it wouldn't." Then she turned and padded across the den to where they stored the herbs. Redwing threw a somewhat confused glance at Tabbypaw, who just shrugged, still looking a bit dejected.

"Hey, you'll get it," Redwing murmured after a heartbeat, shifting to press against Tabbypaw's side reassuringly. "There's so much that could go wrong, I bet it's near impossible to always know what to do. You got close; you'll get it right next time."

Tabbypaw let out a sigh. "I suppose...." He pressed closer against

Redwing for a heartbeat, closing his eyes as he leaned his cheek against the warrior's shoulder, then moved away quickly, bending his head to lick his chest as if he were embarrassed. Redwing blinked, not quite sure what had just happened, but didn't have time to dwell on it as Rainheart returned, carrying a small bundle of leaves.

"These should sooth your throat and stop you from getting anything worse than a mild cough," she meowed, dropping the leaves at Redwing's paws. "Chew them thoroughly for the best effect. Then go get some rest. If you don't feel any better by tomorrow night, come back and see me."

Redwing nodded and bent his head to lap up the small, narrow leaves, wrinkling his nose at their pungent, sickly sweet scent. Despite their sweet smell, the leaves tasted bitter, but he forced himself to chew carefully before swallowing. Then he shook his head in disgust, straightening back up to see Tabbypaw twitching his whiskers.

"You wouldn't be laughing if you were the one having to eat them!" Redwing teased, his tail-tip twitching playfully.

"But I'm not, so ha!" Tabbypaw stuck out his tongue, eyes sparkling with mischief.

"What are you two, kits?" Rainheart scolded, looking up from a pile of herbs she was going through on the other side of the den. "Go play somewhere else."

"Ooh, can I?" Tabbypaw asked eagerly, bouncing to his paws like an excited kit about to leave the nursery for the first time.

"There's nothing for you to do here right now, so sure, go on," Rainheart replied dismissively, rolling her eyes. Then she looked at Redwing. "Don't run around too much though. You need to get rest if you don't want to get sick. And make sure Tabbypaw doesn't get into any trouble," she added with a glint of amusement in her eye.

"I'll look after him," Redwing promised, twitching his whiskers as Tabbypaw looked affronted at being put under the watch of the

younger tom. Then he shrugged and bounded out of the den, Redwing following more slowly.

"Sooo, what should we do?" Tabbypaw asked, whirling around to face Redwing, his tail lashing excitedly. "It's been *ages* since Rainheart really let me have any free time."

Redwing purred with amusement at Tabbypaw's enthusiasm. "I don't know. I'm up for anything, I guess, though Rainheart said to take it easy."

Tabbypaw paused, thinking, then brightened. "Would you keep teaching me to hunt?" He glanced at the sky. "We still have plenty of daylight left."

Redwing considered the request for a moment, then shrugged. "Sure, I don't see why not. We'll go after easy prey, so you can learn and I won't get too tired out."

Tabbypaw nodded, satisfied and nearly quivering with anticipation as Redwing brushed past him and headed up the slope to the entrance of camp. *He's so excitable,* Redwing thought affectionately.

They paused just outside the entrance to camp as Redwing considered where to take Tabbypaw, then headed towards where the sun rose in the morning.

"So what happened to me helping you with herbs today?" Redwing commented as they walked, throwing a glance at Tabbypaw, who was padding beside him. The brown-and-white tom twitched his whiskers.

"I mostly just said that to ease Fernleap's suspicion," he admitted with a shrug. "Don't get me wrong, I would've loved for you to come with me!" he added, twitching his whiskers again, "But my activities are of course subject to Rainheart's whims."

"You seem resentful of her," Redwing observed, flicking his tail, but Tabbypaw shook his head.

"No... well, maybe a little," he admitted. "She's a good teacher but she can be a bit *too* strict sometimes. In my opinion, at least." He let

out a sigh that sounded both exasperated and perhaps a little weary, which almost surprised Redwing. *Even though he acts like a kit much of the time, he's still several moons older than I am.*

"So what made you decide to become a medicine cat?" the ginger tom asked after a moment. "You don't really seem to like it all that much when it comes down to it."

"Does it come off that way?" Tabbypaw meowed, sounding surprised. Then he shrugged. "I'm not suited to be a warrior, I guess. Being a medicine cat is hard, but it's better than having to fight. Among other reasons."

"Other reasons?" Redwing pressed, curious. Tabbypaw gazed at him for a moment, then twitched his whiskers.

"It was actually you and Fernleap that made me finally set my mind on becoming a medicine cat," he meowed, his gaze growing a bit distant, as if he were remembering something. Redwing blinked in surprise.

"Me and Fernleap? Howso?"

Tabbypaw opened his mouth as if to answer his question, then faltered, his eyes for a moment flashing with what Redwing almost thought was fear; then he blinked and it was gone, replaced with Tabbypaw's usual excitement. He paused for a moment, seeming to be thinking, then replied, "I'll tell you if you can catch me!"

Redwing blinked. "Huh?" But Tabbypaw was already racing ahead of him. *StarClan, he's unpredictable.*

With a shrug, Redwing gave chase. His legs were longer and his muscles stronger, but Tabbypaw had already gained quite a bit of distance, and he was still surprisingly quick. He paused and glanced over his shoulder at the ginger warrior, yellow eyes twinkling with mischief, and darted to the side, bounding to the top of a boulder and disappearing down the other side. Redwing followed, enjoying the challenge, and leaped to the top of the rock. He paused there, panting, and glanced across the moor for a sign of the other tom, confused when he didn't see him. Then he heard pawsteps racing

away the direction they had come, followed by clear laughter. Redwing whirled around to see Tabbypaw prancing down the slope, sticking his tongue out playfully.

He must have slipped around the rock when I wasn't paying attention, Redwing thought with a laugh as he slid down the boulder and gave chase again. *Unpredictable for sure. And clever.* Redwing was almost surprised at the affection that welled in his chest at the thought. But it was a different sort of affection than the kind he felt for Fernleap.... affection, and perhaps a bit of admiration? No, that didn't seem quite right either. But Redwing's thoughts were jerked back to the chase as Tabbypaw darted around another boulder. Redwing purred and slowed, skirting around the rock, sure Tabbypaw would try the same trick again.

The ginger tom edged quietly around the stone, expecting to run into the medicine cat, but then he felt something pounce on his tail, pricking it gently with claws and teeth, and whipped his head around to see Tabbypaw biting the end of his tail, looking as cute and innocent as a kit.

"Gotcha!" Redwing exclaimed as he jerked his tail away and made to pounce on Tabbypaw, but the other tom hopped away, laughing, then turned tail and took off again. Redwing bounded after him, but before he could go more than a few tail-lengths, he felt a pain in his chest and skidded to a stop as a coughing fit hit him.

"Are you alright?" Tabbypaw meowed, eyes wide with concern as he returned and pressed against Redwing's side. Redwing leaned against the older tom gratefully as the coughing subsided, suddenly feeling very tired. After a moment, he nodded in response to the medicine cat's question.

"I think so," he meowed, his voice a bit rough from coughing so hard. "I guess that's why Rainheart told me to take it easy," he added, twitching his whiskers at his own foolishness.

"Let's go back to camp," Tabbypaw meowed, eyes round. "You should get some sleep."

Redwing opened his mouth to protest- he had been enjoying

himself- but then stopped as tickle in his throat triggered another cough, though not as bad a fit as before. He sighed, realizing that Tabbypaw was probably right. *I really shouldn't have even left camp in the first place,* he admitted, then nodded to the other tom.

"Alright," he conceded, standing straight to relieve Tabbypaw of his weight. "Let's not hurry though. The day is nice, I'd hate to waste the rest of it in my nest." Tabbypaw looked pleased at the suggestion and nodded in agreement.

The sun was nearly touching the horizon by the time they reached the camp again. They had walked a meandering path at a leisurely pace, pausing here and there to pounce at a beetle or point out strange shapes in the clouds. Despite a dull ache that developed in his chest and head- probably a mild cold, as Rainheart had warned- Redwing felt content. The day was pleasant, and Tabbypaw was good company.

It's nice to have a friend, Redwing thought as he watched Tabbypaw pounce on a leaf caught among the grass. Growing up, his only close friend had been Fernleap, so it felt good to get to know someone new.

As they entered the camp, Redwing dipped his head to Tabbypaw. "I'll see you tomorrow, maybe?" he asked, not bothering to hide the hopefulness coloring his voice. Tabbypaw twitched his whiskers.

"I'll try. But..." he hesitated, then continued, "if you don't mind, I'll help you get settled into your nest. Rainheart will want me to make sure you're resting. Besides, I've had fun today. I'd hate to part so soon," he added, almost teasingly.

Redwing blinked in surprise, but found that he didn't mind at all. "Sure," he purred, giving the other tom a gentle headbutt on the shoulder and then turning towards the warriors' den.

The interior of the den was dark, the gray twilight barely able to penetrate its branches. Several cats already snored softly in their nests, and Redwing was careful not to bump into them or step on a tail as he picked his way to the back of the den where his and Fernleap's nests were, Tabbypaw following closely behind. He

circled in his nest a couple times, then curled up, his tail wrapped neatly over his paws. He nodded for Tabbypaw to join him.

Tabbypaw hesitated for a moment, then laid next to Redwing, curling around him and resting his chin on Redwing's shoulder. Redwing purred, enjoying Tabbypaw's warmth, and they chatted quietly for a bit longer as Redwing felt his eyelids growing heavy. Finally, he let out a wide yawn and rested his head on his paws, pressing closer against Tabbypaw's soft pelt.

As he drifted to sleep, listening to the other tom's purr soft in his ears, he suddenly realized what it was he felt, but the realization was pushed to the back of his mind as sleep overtook him.

Chapter 10

[image]

Redwing woke early the next morning to find that Tabbypaw had left. Instead, Fernleap lay curled beside him, her flank rising and falling gently as she slept. For the first time in his life, Redwing was almost disappointed to see his sister.

Am I really falling in love with Tabbypaw? Redwing asked himself, thinking back to the day before and the conclusion he had come to as he fell asleep. He forced himself not to bristle slightly with surprise and fear. *Can that happen, a tom falling in love with another tom?* He'd never heard of it happening before. It must be possible though- it was happening now.

Redwing shook his head to clear it, forcing his heartbeat to slow. Then he got to his paws, stretched, and picked his way between the sleeping cats and out of the den.

It was still quite early, and Redwing's head felt fuzzy with both sleep and his slight cold. The world looked as he felt; confused and half-asleep, with swirling gray rainclouds gathered in the sky, illuminated by reds and oranges from the approaching dawn that contrasted the grays, purples, and blues of the clouds. It drizzled slightly, and the haze of droplets blurred the landscape beyond the camp, stone and grass blending together in the dreary half-light.

Redwing felt a rumble in his belly as he stood outside the den, letting his eyes adjust to the faint gray light, and he remembered that once again he had forgotten to eat for much of yesterday. *I need to make a habit of eating more,* he thought as he made his way over to the fresh-kill pile. *It can't be good for me to gorge myself in the morning and not eat the rest of the day.* In the excitement of most days, his hunger completely slipped his mind.

And it seems like yesterday was no exception, he thought, remembering the events of the previous day as he chose a plump

mouse from the fresh-kill pile and searched for a dry place to eat. He had hoped for a peaceful, uneventful day, and had almost gotten it, if not for Dovekit and Grousekit's ill-fated adventure. And then his time with Tabbypaw.

Redwing felt a surge of confused, conflicting emotions when he thought of the other tom. On the one paw, he felt anticipation, affection, admiration, and a sense of longing that was new to him. On the other paw, he was nervous, afraid, and uncertain. He had never had so much as a crush before, and now he found himself falling in love with a tom. *And even if Tabbypaw could feel the same way about me, even though we're both toms... he's still a medicine cat.* Redwing let out a sigh. He certainly had a way of finding some kind of conflict no matter where he was or what he was doing.

"Hey."

Redwing's thoughts were interrupted by a gruff, familiar voice and he realized Smokebreath padding towards him. The gray tom plopped down a few mouse-lengths away with a huff and started to groom his short, ruffled fur.

"Hey," Redwing responded to his old mentor likewise, dipping his head. *It would be so easy if I could just ask him for advice like I used to,* Redwing thought with a pang. Things had changed a lot more than he'd realized in the span of just a few days, and he felt as though his life had become a lot more complicated.

Smokebreath gave a noncommittal grunt in response, then looked up from grooming, a twinkle in his eye. "So how was your first day of warriorin'?"

Redwing blinked. "It was.... eventful."

"That's all you have to say about it?" Smokebreath asked with an amused twitch of the whiskers, going back to grooming.

"I take it you heard about what happened with Grousekit, then," Redwing meowed.

The older tom snorted, without looking up, and meowed through

his fur, "Everyone has. Second time you're a hero and you've been a warrior for a day. You could teach all the Clans a thing or two about what it means to be a warrior." Redwing felt his pelt grow warm at the praise, though while he was flattered, he disliked the idea of having attention drawn to him.

"Anyone would do the same thing...." he protested quietly, shifting uncomfortably. Smokebreath raised his head to look at him levelly.

"I've seen more WindClan warriors than you'd care to hear about balk at even stepping a paw in the lake, let alone diving below the waves to drag out a kit that might already be dead. Even I would've hesitated to dive in like you did."

Redwing shrugged and looked away. "I just can't bear to stand by and let bad things happen. Not if I can do anything about it, anything at all."

Smokebreath gazed at him for a moment, then twitched his whiskers. "Selflessness is good. Just be careful you don't toss your life away someday trying to do something impossible."

Redwing opened his mouth to respond, not quite sure what to say, but was saved from having to figure it out as they were approached by Rabbittail. Redwing dipped his head respectfully to the deputy, while Smokebreath just sort of grunted a vague greeting.

Ignoring Smokebreath, Rabbittail looked to Redwing. "Rainheart told me you were to take it easy for today. As such, I'm sending you with Flowernose to the twolegplace border. It should be an easy patrol for both of you."

Redwing dipped his head again. "Is Flowernose up yet?" he asked, brushing the bones of his sparrow aside as he pushed himself to his paws. Rabbittail nodded. "I think she's waiting for you just outside camp."

Redwing dipped his head for a third time as the deputy padded away, then stepped around Smokebreath and headed for the camp entrance. Sure enough, Flowernose was sitting just outside, gazing in the direction of the sunrise. The sun would've broken the horizon

by now, but it was obscured by rainclouds, and so instead the sky was a swirling landscape of gray and pink, with occasional beams of gold breaking through as the clouds shifted before being hidden again heartbeats later. It held a sort of breathtaking, melancholy beauty, but Redwing didn't have time to linger on it as Flowernose purred a greeting and got to her paws.

"It's good to see you well again," Redwing meowed, touching noses with the she-cat. She twitched her whiskers.

"It's thanks to Rainheart," she replied. "So, shall we start by the lake or towards the thunderpath?"

Redwing considered the question for a moment. "Let's start by the lake. I'd rather not linger by it," he added with a laugh.

Flowernose nodded and led the way, leaving the younger cat to trail a bit behind in silence. The world was quiet, muffled by the rain, and Redwing couldn't help but return to his earlier thoughts.

Should I tell Tabbypaw how I feel about him? he wondered as he walked, then shook his head to himself. *No, it would only make things difficult for both of us. Another secret it is, I suppose.* He couldn't help but let out a soft sigh; he was an honest cat, and hated keeping secrets. It felt like lying.

Flowernose glanced over her shoulder at him, and he blinked in surprise that she had heard him.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, dropping back to pad beside him. Redwing shook his head.

"Just a bit tired," he lied, not meeting her eye.

Flowernose blinked, amber eyes gentle. "Come now, don't lie. What's the matter?"

Redwing was silent for a moment, considering what to say that wouldn't give away too much. Then he asked: "Have you ever found yourself falling in love with someone who could never love you back? Or who you couldn't be with for any reason?"

Flowernose gazed at him for a moment, and he looked away uncomfortably, not able to discern what she was thinking. Then she meowed, "Another Clan?"

Redwing shrugged. "For example."

Flowernose was silent for a bit longer, then sighed. "Few cats manage to escape life without feeling that at some time. More cats than you would realize have short-lived romances with cats from outside their Clan, or with medicine cats. Even more find themselves pining for a cat like that." She paused. "I'm no exception. I'll spare you the details. But if you distance yourself, and don't *let* yourself feel that way, well, eventually it sort of goes away. If nothing else, you move on."

Redwing was silent for a few more heartbeats. *So I should distance myself from Tabbypaw? I... I guess that's the best option.* He sighed again, then meowed, "Thanks... I think that helps."

Flowernose nodded, looking understanding. "It's hard, but I know you'll manage. You're a tough little kit."

"Kit?" Redwing replied with false offense. "I'm a *warrior* now!" He puffed out his chest, mocking a gloating kit, which got a purr of laughter from the older she-cat.

The rest of the patrol, fortunately, passed without much excitement. As the morning wore on, the sky began to clear up somewhat. The rain stopped, and patches of blue could be seen through the pale gray clouds that still obscured most of the sky. They didn't catch any prey, though they didn't make much of an attempt to. The most eventful part of their journey was when Redwing spotted a kittypet down the hill, lurking near the border, but it left before the two Clan cats even neared it. Flowernose, much to Redwing's relief, didn't press him on the subject of forbidden romance, though he could sense her curiosity. *I'll have to be careful not to let her figure out that it's Tabbypaw I'm talking about.*

"I'll report to Rabbittail," Flowernose meowed as they padded into camp, the first words that had been spoken between them since their conversation earlier. "Not that we found much, but she should

probably know the barn cat was sniffing about."

Redwing dipped his head. "What should I do now?"

"Whatever you want, I suppose," the she-cat replied with a twitch of her whiskers, padding off towards where Rabbittail was lecturing Brackenpaw on the other side of camp. Redwing stopped at the top of the slope, just inside the camp, and let his gaze sweep across the hollow. The camp was mostly empty, and what cats were in camp had mostly sought out dry spots beneath the rocks and brambles around the edges of the clearing. Smokebreath and Fernleap were nowhere to be seen. Also absent- which relieved Redwing's mind but pained his heart- was Tabbypaw. Resigning himself to boredom, at least for now, Redwing retreated to an isolated corner of camp and began to groom his russet pelt.

Do I really need to avoid him? Redwing wondered as the rhythmic strokes of his tongue became repetitive and mindless. *I wouldn't want to lose him as a friend.... he's fun to be around. But will my feelings go away?*

The ginger tom let out a sigh and sat back on his haunches as he finished with his pelt. The sky was really clearing up now, and faint sunlight washed over the landscape, drying the grass and soil with its warm rays. The air was almost uncomfortably humid, but periodical gusts of wind stirred the stifling air.

It's a rather lazy day, Redwing thought, stretching his front paws forward and arching his back, his chest fur brushing the sand. *Hopefully for real this time.* He crouched there for a while, allowing his thoughts to drift, back to the events of the past few days, as well as more trivial things. He hadn't had the chance to just sit and think for a while.

As he thought, his mind wandered back to the prophecy yet again. He had almost forgotten, in the excitement of yesterday, but the faint weight of anxiety that had settled firmly in his chest wouldn't let it entirely slip his mind. *I wonder if it has anything to do with my dreams,* he thought, though even as it crossed his mind he knew it was true, somehow. *But what do my dreams have to do with 'the sun'?* He thought back to all the dreams he had had: the battlefield, the

fire. *The sun was shining over the battlefield,* he recalled, but had no idea if that held any significance at all. *I wish I could ask that she-cat what she meant.*

Why couldn't you?

The thread of thought was almost a surprise as it invaded his mind, almost like a bright light among the tangled and confused brambles that made up the rest of his thoughts. Yet he was surprised he hadn't thought of it sooner.

I'll need to get my rest, then, Redwing thought, getting to his paws and stretching. *I have a mild cough, so no one will question me sleeping during the day. I guess that worked in my favor.* He padded across the camp, making a point to look somewhat weary, and retreated to his nest in the back of the warriors' den.

Maybe I'll find answers after all, he thought as he forced his mind to calm so that he could drift off to sleep. *Tonight, at the Moonpool.*

Chapter 11

[image]

It was dark when Redwing fully awoke.

He had slept fitfully throughout the day, easily disturbed as other cats came and left. Finally, as darkness had begun to fall, he slipped more easily into sleep, the barest phantoms of dreams dancing around the edges of his mind. Now, though, he was fully awake, and he knew it was time.

Fernleap was sleeping peacefully beside him, as always, and the den was nearly full. Careful not to wake anyone, Redwing got to his paws and stepped silently and carefully among the sleeping cats, then out of the den and into the humid air outside. The air had cooled since the sun had vanished, but it was still warm, though the breeze was almost chilly and spoke of the coming leaf-fall. The sky had mostly cleared, and now the stars shone around patches of darkness that betrayed the presence of clouds. The moon, for the moment, was nowhere to be seen, but that allowed the glory of Silverpelt to dominate the sky in its stead.

A good night for speaking with StarClan, I think.

Redwing looked around the camp, taking note of the few sentries perched on rocks here and there around the top of the hollow. He quietly made his way up the slope to the entrance of camp, dipping his head to Wildstorm- who was keeping watch at the entrance- as he passed.

"Restless?" the tortoiseshell tom asked, twitching his whiskers. Redwing nodded.

"Tired all day, and now I can't sleep," he meowed, cringing inwardly at the lie.

Wildstorm didn't seem to notice at all, though, as he replied, "Yeah, coughs will do that."

Not really sure what else to say and not wanting to carry on a conversation, Redwing just nodded and continued on his way, aware of Wildstorm watching him with green eyes.

Until he was well out of sight of the camp, Redwing meandered, heading in the general direction of the stream that made up the border between WindClan and ThunderClan but not obviously heading for it until he was sure he wouldn't be seen. He was relying on the thick covering of WindClan scent on the moor to hide his path- or at least not make it too obvious- as well as the fact that no cat would have any reason to be suspicious of him or follow his trail.

Before long, Redwing could hear the cheerful bubbling of the stream in its stony bed, and headed straight for it at a brisk pace. The night was well under way by now, so he knew he should hurry if he wanted to have time to make it to the Moonpool and back before anyone realized he was gone. To make it more difficult, he had never actually been to the Moonpool before, and he wasn't quite sure what to do when he got there. He knew following the stream that ran from the Moonpool to the lake would take him there, and that medicine cats slept in the hollow to share tongues with StarClan, but past that, he could only guess. Still, something in his gut told him this would work.

As he neared the WindClan border, he paused for a moment, then waded up to his knees into the stream, wincing at the cold. He struggled upstream, tripping occasionally on unstable or slippery rocks, until he was well past the border, then returned to the shore, shaking the water off his legs and shivering slightly. *That should hide my scent.*

The moor past the border seemed to stretch on forever, but as Redwing began to worry that he wouldn't be able to make it in time, he saw a hill up ahead, over the side of which flowed the stream.

That must be it!

With that thought, Redwing broke into a run, slowing as he reached the top of the hill, panting. The hill was hollow, a stony path

spiraling down to a shallow pool at the bottom. *The Moonpool.*

The water was clear and smooth, reflecting the black sky above and each brilliant star with crystal clarity. It almost didn't seem to be water at all, but instead a void that lead directly to StarClan's hunting ground itself.

Redwing allowed himself to stare for a moment before following the path down to the water's edge. He paused in surprise as he felt his paw slip easily into a groove in the stone, and upon inspection realized it was an ancient pawprint, and that many more littered the path. *They look far older than even the lake Clans,* he thought. *Did cats live here before us?*

With a new sense of awe, the WindClan warrior padded down the slope. A faint breeze touched his fur and he started slightly. It almost felt as though other cats were moving around him, their pelts brushing his, their pawsteps guiding him along the same path that they had walked so long ago.

You're being imaginative, Redwing thought, shaking his head and proceeding. He approached the water slowly, the endless reflecting unnerving him somewhat as if he were standing at the edge of a cliff.

"What now?" Redwing wondered out loud, not sure how to proceed.

Drink.

The thought- not his own- surprised Redwing. It was like a half-remembered voice whispered on the breeze. Obedient, Redwing settled into a crouch and lapped up a few drops of the water.

Sleep.

Redwing felt a wave of weariness suddenly wash over him, and despite himself he felt his eyes closing.

Come, Redwing. Come.

And he slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 12

[image]

Everything was chaos.

Colors and scenes flashed around Redwing, fragments of every dream he had ever had and more. Mountains towered into the sky, and Redwing drank in the sight- he had never seen mountains before. Fire flashed across the moor, foxes and cats and rabbits fleeing together from the inferno that swallowed their home. Cats gathered on an outcropping of rock beneath a full moon, the land below them lost in shadow, while others milled like ants in tunnels below the earth, some lost and some found, their pelts faded like stars smothered by the light of dawn. A bright meadow scattered with butterflies and wildflowers was replaced by the all-too-familiar sight of the blood and gore of battle. In a shady hollow beneath towering oaks, five cats sat serenely on a massive boulder, and their eyes flashed with moonlight. Birdsong mixed with the sound of rushing water and cries of rage and agony. Redwing tried to close his eyes to block out the confusing flashes of color, but he realized he could not, for it was within his mind. All he could do was watch and endure.

Until finally he became aware of another presence, soft and comforting. It swept aside the nightmares like dead leaves from the forest floor, leaving only blessed darkness and silence in its place. And for a timeless while, Redwing was content to sit in the darkness as the pain that had grown behind his eyes and in his ears faded to memory.

"You seek answers."

A voice, not his own, broke the silence of Redwing's mind. It was quiet and soft, rushing gently over him like water.

"I do," was his only reply. He could see nothing in the darkness.

"Can you ask the right questions?"

The inquiry surprised him. The voice seemed almost coy, teasing, though not in a hurtful way- more like the way a mentor challenges their apprentice to run faster or find solutions to strange problems.

"Why do I need to ask if you already know what I seek?" Redwing tilted his head slightly, though he wasn't sure the gesture had any meaning in this spaceless void.

"It would be no accomplishment if you simply did as you were directed to do," came the reply. "No, you must find your own answers and your own path."

"But cats are dying!" Redwing protested. "In my dreams. And somewhere out there, for real, I can feel it. They need help."

"That is the way of the world," the voice purred. "Not everyone can be saved, nor should they be. Life is made of choices, and sometimes your choices are wrong."

Redwing hesitated for a heartbeat, then asked, "What are the right questions, then?"

He was met with laughter, clear and bright, but its echoes reverberated deep within his mind.

"You are clever." The voice took on an amused tone now. "I am tempted to answer. But you must find the questions yourself."

"How will I know that I've found the right questions?" he asked.

"When you are satisfied with their answers."

Redwing glowered, frustrated. He considered his words for a moment before asking: "Who are you?"

For a heartbeat there was no reply, as if the owner of the voice was considering their answer. "I am the one you will seek. And that you will find, when the time is right."

Redwing's eyes widened. "Do you mean... are you the 'sun'?"

A purr echoed through the void. "You are getting closer. But our

time is drawing to a close, for now. You will come to me when the time is right, my butterfly. You will know the time. Your dreams will put you on the correct path."

"Wait, I haven't asked the right questions yet!" Redwing cried as his mind grew fuzzy, as if he were falling asleep all over again.

"You will, butterfly," said the voice. "You will. Someday."

Chapter 13

[image]

And again, Redwing opened his eyes.

This time, he sat in a quiet meadow. No scent of blood tainted the air; no cries of battle or agony pierced the quiet.

The meadow looked to be in early greenleaf. Everything was green and strong, but still had the soft glow of new foliage. Wildflowers dotted the grass, butterflies flitting among their vibrant petals. Birds chirped in the trees, and somewhere in the darkness of the branches, Redwing could hear the chattering of squirrels.

"You're here."

Redwing whipped around as a voice rang across the clearing, high and trilling, like the song of a loon. Behind him, padding silently through the tall grass, was the silver she-cat from the moor. Her bright green eyes shone with a mixture of happiness and trepidation as she stopped a tail-length away, looking the WindClan tom up and down.

"I'm here," Redwing replied, dipping his head. Then he glanced around. "Though I'm not quite sure where *here* is."

The she-cat looked surprise. "StarClan's hunting grounds, of course! Where else would you be?"

"I was...." he paused, wondering if he should mention the vision he had had before waking here, if waking was the right word to use. It didn't seem like she knew about it. But something told Redwing not to mention it. Not yet at least.

"You were...?" the she-cat inquired, blinking. Redwing shook his head.

"I was expecting something more.... starry," he lied, adding a bit of

a joking tone to his voice. The she-cat twitched her whiskers.

"Yes, I hear that a lot from new medicine cat apprentices," she meowed, settling on the grass and wrapping her tail neatly around her paws. "But eternal greenleaf isn't a bad deal either."

"I suppose it wouldn't be." Redwing glanced around again, though he couldn't bring himself to adopt the same relaxed demeanor as the StarClan cat.

"So, why have you come here?" the she-cat asked, tilting her head as Redwing turned his gaze back to her.

"Shouldn't you know?" he asked surprised. "It seems you were expecting me."

"I suppose that's true," the she-cat replied with a shrug. "Still, if you ask a question, it gives me a better place to start."

"Fine," Redwing meowed, letting out a sigh. He cast in his mind for the best question to ask first. Remembering his conversation with the entity in the void, he decided to go the same route: "Who are you?"

The she-cat flicked her tail. "My name is Whisperleaf. I was a medicine cat of RiverClan long ago."

"Then why are you speaking to me?" Redwing asked, tilting his head. "Wouldn't you rather contact a cat from your own Clan?"

Whisperleaf twitched her whiskers. "After you've been in StarClan as long as I have, Clan divisions stop meaning anything. You are all living cats under the guidance and protection of StarClan, as much as we can offer." As she spoke, an edge came into her voice, as if she were chastising someone. Redwing wondered if she had had an argument with another StarClan cat on the subject recently.

"Fair enough," he replied, deciding not to call attention to her tone. There were more important questions to be asked, and hopefully answered. "Why did you tell me to find the sun? What *is* the sun?"

Whisperleaf shuffled her paws, looking away uncertainly. "I don't

know."

"You don't.... then why did you tell me that?" Redwing demanded. *A StarClan cat doesn't even know* why *she told me to do something? That's helpful.*

"I don't know!" she repeated, now turning back to look him in the eye. "I saw it in the waters. You are an important cat Redwing. Soon to the Clans, after that, to many others, far away. And in the water I saw a message to you. I don't know where it came from." A distant look came into her eyes, as if she were remembering something from long ago, or trying to recall an exact feeling or sight or scent. "It was like a calling, as if something or someone else were calling to you from far away. Something powerful." Redwing had to stop himself from bristling, remembering the voice in the void. *Something powerful and far away.*

"You're a very important cat, Redwing," she meowed, now quieter. "I can guide you, but I think the importance of your fate goes far beyond the Clans, even StarClan itself."

"How can my fate go beyond StarClan?" Redwing exclaimed, disconcerted. *I don't* want *to be important! Why did it have to be* me*?*

"I don't know," Whisperleaf meowed for the third time. "Perhaps I'm wrong, but I don't think I am. I have never been wrong about a prophecy before."

Redwing's pelt went cold. "A prophecy?"

"Yes." Whisperleaf sighed, then recited, almost in a chanting tone: "Those now united must divide, and the divided must return to their roots and call forth the spurned. Only then can the new sun rise and chase away death."

"The sun...." Redwing repeated. "And I have to find whatever this sun is?"

"I think so," Whisperleaf replied. "And I think it will take you many moons and a long journey." She sighed, then met his eyes with a look almost of pure heartbreak. "But first, there are other things

that must happen. You need to go now, or you'll never see them again."

"What?" Redwing demanded, surprised by the dark turn their conversation had taken. Or rather, darker. "What do you mean?" But again, the dream was already fading.

"Run, Redwing. Save them."

And again, the world went dark.

Chapter 14

[image]

Redwing jerked awake, his heart racing and Whisperleaf's parting words echoing in his head. *"Save them."*

The ginger tom pushed himself into a sitting position blinking as his eyes adjusted to the light. *Light?*

Looking up, he realized that the sky in the direction of the lake was pink and red, the light from below reflecting off the clouds and casting them in a magnificent array of colors. *I slept way too long. They'll miss me back at camp.* Then, with a jolt, he realized that it was in the wrong direction for the sunrise.

Save them.

He leaped to his paws, slipping slightly on the cool, damp stone, and bounded up the slope to the top of the hollow, his heart pounding in his chest. *No.* In his mind, he recalled the stench of flames and ashes from his nightmares. *No, no, no!* He slipped over the edge, racing along the shore of the stream that ran from the Moonpool. *I have to get back!*

It felt like a dream as he ran, as though his mind could not fully comprehend what was happening. It didn't seem real, though he knew that this time, it wasn't a dream. As he neared the border, a dry gust of wind brought the scent of burning foliage. *ThunderClan's territory is burning. WindClan is next.*

As he reached the border, he veered away from the stream and made a beeline towards the camp. In the direction the sun would rise, he could see that the sky was beginning to turn pink as well, but it didn't matter. Concealing his absence was the last thing on Redwing's mind now.

A few cats were stirring in the camp as Redwing burst in, skidding to a stop and panting. Rootfur and Runningheart looked up from

where they were sharing tongues by the fresh-kill pile, looking concerned.

"Redwing, what's wrong?" Rootfur asked, getting to her paws. Runningheart sat up, his pelt bristling slightly.

"F-fire," Redwing gasped, trying to catch his breath. Runningheart leaped to his paws as well.

"Where?" he demanded, looking at the sky. After a moment, he too seemed to realize that the red sky was in the wrong place for sunrise.

"The forest," Redwing replied, still panting but beginning to recover. "ThunderClan now, I think. It'll spread here and the grass will burn even faster than the trees."

"We need to get everyone out of camp," Rootfur meowed, looking at Runningheart. There was terror shining in her orange eyes, but her voice was steady. "We should go to the lake. Fire can't burn water, but it can everything else."

Runningheart nodded. "I'll wake Gorsestar. You two start waking everyone else up." He darted away, slipping into the leader's den.

"I'll get the warriors," Rootfur meowed. "You wake Brackenpaw, then the nursery." Redwing nodded, bounding across the camp and slipping into the apprentices den. Brackenpaw was sound asleep, splayed out in his nest, and Redwing jabbed him in the belly with his claws half-unsheathed.

"Hey!" the apprentice complained, half-opening one eye. "What's that for?" he yawned, rolling onto his belly and stretching.

"Fire," Redwing explained shortly. "We're evacuating to the lake. Get the elders."

Brackenpaw shook his head to clear it, then nodded, getting to his paws and stifling another yawn. He, too, looked terrified, but he calmly slipped past Redwing and headed for the elders' den.

Redwing followed the apprentice out of the den, then moved

quickly to the nursery. Sandshade looked up as he entered, Dovekit and Grousekit curled at her belly.

"What is it, Redwing?" she asked quietly, raising her head and yawning.

"The forest is burning. Everyone needs to get to the lake," he meowed quickly. Outside of the den, in the camp, he could hear cats now moving around and shouting to each other. Sandshade's eyes widened, but she didn't asked questions. She began to wake Dovekit and Grousekit as Redwing backed out of the den, looking around the camp. He spotted Fernleap nudging the elders along, hurrying them up the slope and out of the hollow. The ginger tom moved out of the way as Sandshade slipped past him, leading Grousekit and carrying Dovekit in her jaws. Smokebreath hurried over and grabbed Grousekit, and the four cats pushed through the crowd and disappeared through the gorse wall. In the crowd, Redwing could see Rainheart carrying bundles of herbs with the help of Fawnfoot and Flowernose. Flamefur was directing warriors out of camp, helping to keep the exodus from descending into chaos.

Where's Tabbypaw? he thought suddenly, not spotting the tabby-and-white apprentice among the other cats. He scented the air, but he couldn't discern any trace of the other tom's scent through the acrid smell of fire and the confused jumble of cat-scents. *He must be out of camp. I need to find him!*

Redwing bounded up the slope and squeezed through the gorse, rather than fighting through the crowd of cats, and paused on the other side, scanning the moor for any sign of the medicine cat apprentice. Again, he scented the air, and this time he thought he caught a faint whiff of his scent.

"Where are you going?"

Redwing was interrupted as Fernleap's voice called from the crowd, and turned to see her gazing at him with a worried expression.

"I need to find Tabbypaw!" he called back. Fernleap glanced at the rest of the cats, who were too busy fleeing to pay attention to their

conversation, then bounded over.

"I'll come with you," she meowed. "I'm a better tracker than you, anyways. We need to find him *fast*." There was an odd note in the she-cat's voice as she gazed at him, but Redwing didn't question it. She was right, they were out of time.

"Alright, let's go. Please, be careful though," he added, flicking her shoulder with his tail. "I don't want to lose you." Fernleap blinked at him affectionately, then raised her head to scent the air, considering it for a moment.

"This way." She bounded off across the grass, heading towards the ThunderClan border. Above, the sky was an angrier shade of red from before, the haze of the flames and smoke billowing like a red and black storm above the forest. Redwing swallowed his trepidation and followed, keeping an eye out for Tabbypaw or any other cats who may have strayed from camp before he had arrived.

Fernleap led them across the moor, weaving through the grass and around rocks as she followed Tabbypaw's trail. Redwing's heart bounded with fear and worry, and he struggled to stifle the panic that was welling in his chest. Suddenly, she veered towards the lake. *He must have spotted the fire and headed towards the lake like everyone else,* Redwing realized, suddenly feeling hopeful. But his hope vanished as he spotted a dark lump of fur lying in the grass up ahead.

"Tabbypaw!" Redwing rushed past his sister, stopping by the other tom's side. He lay crumpled in the grass, a trickle of blood staining his forehead. "No...."

"He's still breathing," Fernleap meowed as she stopped beside him. "Maybe he tripped when he was running or something. Either way, we need to get to the lake."

"We'll need to carry him," Redwing meowed. "I'll take most of his weight." Fernleap nodded, looking uncertain, then grasped the tom by the scruff and helped pull him onto Redwing's shoulders. The ginger tom grimaced as he took Tabbypaw's full weight- he was heavier than expected. Faintly, he could hear the roar of flames.

They started off again, at a much slower pace this time. Fernleap stayed pressed partially against Redwing to help support Tabbypaw's weight, and to keep him from falling, but Redwing still struggled to walk at a quick speed. On his back, he felt Tabbypaw begin to stir.

"R-redwing?" he meowed groggily, raising his head as he blinked open his eyes.

"I'm here," the tom replied. "We're going to the lake."

"I'm sorry," Tabbypaw murmured quietly, still seeming half-unconscious. "This is my fault. I went looking for you."

Redwing twisted his head to cast a sideways glance at the medicine cat, surprised. "Why?"

"I had a dream," Tabbypaw whispered. "I needed to tell you, I know who the she-cat is. I know where you need to go."

Redwing almost stopped in surprise, but he forced himself to keep moving. Part of him wanted to demand that Tabbypaw tell him now, but he knew it needed to wait. "We'll talk about it when we get to the lake," he reassured him. "Rest for now."

"No," Tabbypaw replied. "If you carry me like this, we won't make it. And I'm not sure I can walk on my own yet. You need to leave me."

Redwing glanced at the sky. Smoke billowed above, and the roar of the fire was closer than ever. *He might be right. But I* won't *leave him behind.*

"We'll make it. It's not much farther," he meowed, struggling to increase his pace. "What happened?"

"Badger," Tabbypaw muttered. "It was running, knocked me right over. I guess I hit my head. Everything's blurry."

"You'll be fine," Redwing meowed, though he could feel the heat washing through the trees like a dry, burning wind. Ahead, the lake sparkled with crimson and orange light, more brilliant and more

ominous than any dawn. "We can make it." He veered away from the forest, hoping that putting some distance between them and it would give them more time.

"Redwing." This time it was Fernleap speaking. "He's right, we won't make it. We need to run."

"Let me down," Tabbypaw muttered. "I can try to walk." He slipped off Redwing's back, staggering as he hit the ground, but he remained on his paws. He leaned against Redwing, limping alongside the other two. It was only a little faster than the other way, but it helped. Through the trees, Redwing could see the glare of the flames.

"Hurry!" he meowed, giving Tabbypaw a nudge.

"I'm trying!" Tabbypaw growled, lashing his tail. He looked up at the forest, sadness glinting in his eyes. "You need to leave me. *Maybe* I can make it on my own, but if you go now, you two definitely can."

"No, I won't leave you behind," Redwing growled back. "We're all going to be fine."

"Redwing, he's right. We need to run," Fernleap meowed, an edge of panic to her voice. The fire was almost to the stream. Once on the grass, they would be lucky to outrun it. Redwing felt a twinge of panic as he recognized the exact scene from his nightmares, except now, Tabbypaw and Fernleap were with him. *It's not just my life now.*

"Go," he meowed to Fernleap. "I'll stay with Tabbypaw."

"No, you have to come!" Fernleap wailed. She looked at him pleadingly. "Please."

"She's right. You can go," Tabbypaw meowed, stepping away from Redwing. "It's okay." The flames were nearly at the edge of the trees.

"I won't go without you," Fernleap growled. "Its both of us or neither."

"I'll try to run," Tabbypaw meowed. "But if I stumble, don't stop." Redwing growled, but nodded. It was their only chance now. The shore was still several treelengths away.

"Let's go." The three cats took off, though Tabbypaw wasn't as quick as the other two. He hadn't spent as much time running on the moor, and he still seemed to be somewhat groggy. But Redwing was hopeful that they would make it.

To their right, the flames roared at the edge of the trees. For a heartbeat, the water stopped them, but Redwing knew better than to hope that the moor wouldn't ignite. Each pawstep seemed to slow as he waited for the inevitable.

And then, a spark landed in the dry grass.

The flames roared across the moor, a wave of heat rolling over the three cats. He could see terror in Fernleap and Tabbypaw's eyes, their pelts bristling as they scrambled desperately towards the water, which sloshed only a foxlength ahead, its surface dotted with ashes and half-burned leaves. *We're all going to make it.*

As they stepped onto the pebbles, Fernleap slipped and stumbled. Tabbypaw skidded to a stop to avoid crashing into her, stumbling and falling. Redwing paused at the edge of the water, watching in panic as the flames swept towards them. He locked eyes with Tabbypaw- then Fernleap rolled and pushed both her and Redwing into the water. Redwing thrashed as his head went under, and he could see the red light of the flames dancing above the surface. He scrambled to gain footing on the smooth, slippery stones and sand. Finally, he managed to stand, gasping as his head broke the surface.

"Tabbypaw!" he gasped, blinking the water out of his eyes as he looked desperately towards the shore, narrowing his eyes against the light and heat. A wall of flames roared a treelength away. Even as Fernleap's head broke the surface as well, Tabbypaw was nowhere to be seen.

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The Real Warriors: I Guess I'll Go in the Woods or Something - A sort of silly story taking place during the first arc; an AU where Smudge becomes the kittypet savior of ThunderClan, Tigerclaw is ThunderClan's medicine cat, and there are a lot of other more-or-less irrelevant and unnecessary changes to the characters. https://www.wattpad.com/story/63977383-the-real-warriors-i-guess-i%27ll-go-in-the-woods-or

Dreams of Blood - another Warriors fanfiction of mine, using some of the first characters and plots that my friends and I ever came up with. https://www.wattpad.com/story/123935858-dreams-of-blood-dark-storm-1